

Chapter 1 – Letters From Nobody

"*Can I rip into them?*"

"No."

"C'mon!"

"**No!**"

"*Just a LITTLE!*"

"**NO!**"

"Oh, go to hell you stupid snake."

Boris scowled.

Harry scowled.

The Dursleys watched on with a look of horror on their faces.

"They deserve it, though!" Harry argued, moving one set of bacon from the pan and putting more in. "I know I said I'd never use it, but *come on!*"

"*How many times am I going to have to tell you NO? Besides, you'll get in trouble for it.*" Hissed the taipan, who was curled lazily around Harry's neck. "*And everyone would be mad and disappointed at you besides.*"

"Oh, fine." Harry muttered. "I *won't* tear their souls apart. Ruin my fun. See if I care!"

"Tear our souls apart?" Squeaked Petunia, who promptly fainted.

"Just what do you think you're doing, boy?!" Vernon yelled, catching his wife mid-fall.

"Talking about you fat oafs. What the hell else would I talk about with Boris in private?" Asked Harry. "Now shut up if you want your bloody food, you damn rhino!"

"Don't you talk to me like that!" Vernon spat, setting his wife gently on the floor before starting to march towards the stove. "And furthermore...!"

"And furthermore, you *WILL* shut up and you *WILL* stop irritating the piss out of me or I *WILL* tear your soul into so many pieces you'll be ripping your own body apart to try and get the ***PAIN TO STOP!***" Harry yelled, the air around him crackling. "Now sit **DOWN!**"

Vernon stared at Harry, having come to a full stop well before he got within striking distance.

"Calm down." Murmured Boris. *"Calm down, leave the food, and let's go back to our room."*

"Are you sure I can't leave them as husks?" Asked Harry, slipping back into Parseltongue as he turned and left the kitchen. *"For that matter, are you sure I can't just burn them and the house down? Two birds in one stone."*

"No." Said the snake in as firm a voice as he could.

For the entire week he had been back at Number Four, Harry had been in a state of near constant irritation. Anything the Dursleys said or did seemed to make him angry. And it was driving Boris up the walls. The snake did his best to calm Harry down, but it wasn't an easy task. Left to his own devices, away from his school and friends, Harry was finally having the breakdown that Boris was worried he would have.

He was starting to think he should have waited to tell the boy about the Anima Laniatus.

Throwing himself back on his bed, Harry glared up at the ceiling. "I want out of here. I'm going to *get* out of here. And if Dumbledore doesn't like it, he can jump in the lake. In winter. And have to stay there for over an hour."

"At least you're getting it out of your system." Commented Boris in as dry a tone as he could muster. *"You need to control your emotions."*

Your wild magic is going to go off and bring the house down if this continues."

"I missed the part of that that's *bad*, Boris." Harry said.

"The Ministry will get involved and the last thing YOU want is to go on trial in either the wizarding or Muggle communities for nuking your family and exploding your HOUSE, you daft sod." Boris stated. "Now close your eyes and concentrate."

"Yeah, yeah. Meditation." Harry said. Then, in a quiet mutter, he added, "Like to see the old man meditate himself into a coma. Blood wards or not, this is insane."

"I agree with the last statement." Boris said. "For you're acting that way very well."

"It's kept those idiots quiet. I wanna know where Tonks is. I haven't heard from her since I got back." Harry said.

"Or anyone else, it would seem."

"Yes, that too. Makes me wonder if a certain house elf has decided to intercept the letters again." Harry said. "I swear, I'll petrify him and use him as a doorstep if he's behind this."

"Oh, you'll do no such thing." Said Boris. "Eyes closed. Concentrate. Stop talking."

"Yes, yes." Harry scowled, closing his eyes and trying to focus.

Boris let out an inaudible sigh. If he survived this summer, he would be thanking every serpent-shaped deity ever to exist. If he survived with his sanity, even moreso.

"Now then," Began the snake, noticing Harry's breathing had slowed. "Think about one thing and one thing alone. A person, an object, it doesn't matter so long as it isn't related to what's bothering you. Slow, deep breaths. Yes, like that. Now keep at it for half an hour."

And, almost exactly thirty minutes later, Harry opened his eyes again.

"How do you feel?" Asked Boris.

"Better." Said Harry, sitting up and rubbing his temples. "Less like making the Dursleys turn into balloons and flying away. Or turning them into kindling. Still wondering why the hell Nymmy hasn't come over. Still wondering what's happening with the outside world."

"Better than nothing. You need to stop losing yourself, Harry. Remember all I've told you. I still trust you not to do anything you shouldn't."

"I won't. It just helps for me to yell. Gets stuff out, y'know? Besides, it scares the hell out of them. After all I've taken, it's about time I started to give back." Harry said.

"Be that as it may, I'd rather you not bring the Laniatus into your threats. It's highly unnerving. And I think it's time you left the house to go and see Tonks rather than hoping she'll show up here." Said Boris.

"I feel like I'm being *watched*." Harry said, getting up from his bed and walking to the window. "I can almost feel someone's eyes on me whenever I'm outside. Creeps me out. And anyway, the idiots downstairs send tons-o'-fun after me whenever I try leaving."

"So let Dudley follow. Who cares?"

"I do. Because if he said or tried doing anything to Tonks, I don't know that I could keep myself in control. I know my wild magic would break free of what little grasp I have on it. I'd rather not explode anyone in front of the girl I plan to marry, thanks."

"You can outrun him. I've seen you do it." Boris said.

"I dunno. You may be right. You were with the meditation thing. Not very good at clearing my mind, though." Harry mumbled, walking back to his bed.

"Treat your thoughts as though they were labeled. Sort them into categories. Lock each category behind a door or something. Just concentrating on one thing is enough for now, but to truly clear your mind, you need to move the clutter out of the way. Just as you

wouldn't leave your room messy and unorganized, you shouldn't just have memories and thoughts laying about." Boris explained. *"You will learn with time."*

"I hope so. ...I guess I'll try going out tomorrow. I don't want to be out after dark today." Harry said.

"Fair enough. Now try relaxing before lunch rolls around, alright? Work on sorting your memories. It will help sort your emotions out, as well. If you need to, lock your anger and sorrow up as you do with your memories. It's not healthy, but neither is what you're doing. And keeping you calm will make everyone less stressed." Said the taipan.

"Noted. Sorry. I guess I have been out of control this week." Harry said.

"To say the least. But it's alright. The more emotional you are, the more you'll see the benefits of clearing it all away. You're a quick learner, Harry. You'll get it down by the end of summer."

"Think so?"

"I'd bet my life on it."

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The following afternoon rolled around quietly. The Dursleys, still skittish around Harry after his threat, had mostly ignored him. That sat perfectly well with Harry, who still found himself confusingly annoyed with them. He was trying to follow Boris' instructions on clearing his mind, but it wasn't doing him a lot of good.

"Coming with me on my walk?" Asked Harry, slipping his shoes on in his room.

"I think that can be arranged." Said the snake. *"I'd rather not be left alone with those people."*

"Yeah. The last thing I need is for Vernon to get a head of steam going. He'd try smashing you with something long. A broom or

something." Harry said, holding his arm out to the taipan, who slithered up his arm slowly.

"With any luck, Tonks will be able to explain the lack of visits and mail." Said Boris as he settled around Harry's upper arm.

"I hope so. I'd-- oh, bugger all. Why's there have to be an owl ri-- wait, an owl?"

Harry walked over to his window, opening it up and staring at the regal-looking owl that entered with a look of confusion. "Hello then. Who are you bringing me a letter from? You don't belong to anyone I know..."

The owl gave a quiet hoot, holding its leg towards Harry. Harry nodded, untying the letter from around it, and offered it a few owl treats. To Harry's surprise, it turned its head up at the sight of the treats, turning around and flying off just as quickly as it had arrived. Harry watched it fly off, the look of confusion still on his face.

"What in the hell just happened?" Asked Harry, looking down at the letter in his hands.

"Who is it from?" Asked Boris.

"Doesn't say." Harry said, frowning. "...Right. I just got a nameless letter from an owl I don't recognize. That should be setting off an alarm. The envelope seems alright. Dunno about the actual stuff in it. Suggestions?"

"Extricate it using a quill?"

"Might take a bit of doing, but it's better than being portkeyed away again." Harry said, setting the letter down on his desk while he rummaged in his trunk for a quill.

It took a few minutes of work to get the note itself out and straightened without actually touching it. He didn't pay much attention to what was written as he worked. In the end, he had a few paperweights keeping it straight. It was only then that he glanced at the bottom of it. When he saw the name signed there, he gaped.

"Wh... okay, now I *know* this has to be a portkey." He said.

"*Why?*"

"Because I know I'd never get a letter from *him*." Harry said.

"*What does it say?*"

"Let's see..." Harry said, eyes darting to the top of the letter and slowly reading what it said. Harry's breathing slowed as he read, his brow creasing further and further as he went. "This is... but no. No, it can't be..."

"*Harry? Harry, tell me what's wrong. Who wrote it? What does it say?*" Asked Boris, slithering down Harry's arm to poke out of the end of his shirt sleeve.

"He... *he's* the one Pansy was talking about? He basically said I was right. And...there's a warning at the end." Harry said, his voice hushed.

"*A warning?*"

"Dementors." Harry explained. "It said that one of Voldemort's followers plans to set some dementors loose on Privet Drive!"

"*When?*"

"Tonight." Harry said. "...I've got to get out of here. I've got to get out of here *now*."

"*Calm down.*" Boris said, feeling Harry's pulse quicken. "*It's early afternoon. You have time. THINK.*"

Harry closed his eyes and forced himself to level his breathing out again. "Sorry, but... this is really just... I can't even describe this, Boris. He wants me to memorize what he wrote and then *burn* the letter. That he wants no one else to know. I... can't say as I blame him. But that's even taking into consideration that this is *REAL!*"

"*Why would you believe it to be false?*" Asked Boris.

"Trust me, Boris." Harry said, grabbing both the envelope and letter and stuffing them into the front pockets of his jeans. He would have plenty of chances to burn them later. Right now, though... "I need to think. Obviously, I can't just disappear. They'd strike the house. And as much as I hate them, I can't just let the Dursleys become food for the dementors. I need to wait until it's almost dark out before I leave the house."

"A dangerous choice." Said the snake quietly.

"It is." Harry agreed. "But there are no other options. And leaving later in the day would mean less chance of Dudley being set after me. I wish I could write to Pansy. She'd be able to tell me one way or another what the hell is going on."

"Hedwig stands out too much?"

"Yeah." Harry said, looking over at the snowy owl, who hooted indignantly. "Well I'm sorry, but it's true! There are very few beautifully snow white owls flying about!"

Hedwig settled down slightly at the compliment, but still looked annoyed that she couldn't set out with a letter.

"First thing I'm going to do when I get the chance is to talk to Dumbledore about this. He mentioned going over me to him if I didn't believe what he said. I don't see the harm in telling the headmaster. It's just... I dunno. I'll get my head around it when I talk to him. Right now I should be worrying about the dementors." Harry said, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Did it say how many would be set loose?" Asked the snake.

"Said that at least two would be, but I should be ready for more than that." Harry replied.

"A wise thing to say. You cannot use magic until you are of age, though. So what can you do against any that attack?"

"I dunno. He said it would be better getting in trouble with the Ministry than it would be losing my soul. I have to say, I agree on that."

Wholeheartedly, in fact." Harry said. "And *that* is an odd thing to say. Agreeing with that idiot. I don't believe this."

"We all must see reality for what it is sooner or later. Perhaps it merely took this person longer than it would have for most." Offered Boris.

"Yeah, maybe. Or this is some kind of elaborate trap."

"Or that."

"...Right, I'm gonna try and relax. Meditate an' stuff. I need to try and focus and my mind is racing right now." Harry said, scooting back on his bed. "Run me through the steps again?"

"Of course."

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As Harry made dinner that evening, he was having a hard time keeping himself from jumping at the slightest noise. When the air conditioner had come on, Harry had pulled both wands and was searching for the source of the cold. Of course, the Dursleys had promptly hit the floor when Harry had whirled around, thinking he was going to attack them. The meal was spent in a tense silence.

As Harry brought the dishes to the sink, he cleared his throat. "I'm going for a walk."

"Fine. Go." Vernon said, glaring at the boy.

"...Damn it. I hope I can draw away anything that's coming." Harry whispered in Parseltongue. *"I really don't need a death AND the loss of their souls on my mind."*

"The death shouldn't be an issue anymore." Boris replied. *"You need to let it go. Grieve and move on, Harry. Blaming yourself for the rest of your life will accomplish nothing. And there are far more important things to be thinking of now."*

"I know, I know." Harry said, shaking his head slowly. *"It's just... I dunno. I really need to get this outta my system. Once we're back at Hogwarts, I'll try getting this taken care of in the training room."*

"Wearing yourself out isn't exactly wise." Boris pointed out.

"Yeah, well, neither is spending all my time wondering what I could have done differently." Harry muttered. Finishing his work, he turned and headed out of the kitchen. Just as he reached the front door, he heard Dudley's chairs slide out. "...Damn it."

"You may have to risk trouble with the Ministry after all." Said Boris.

"Looks like it." Harry said, scowling. Slipping out of Number Four, Harry was halfway down the road by the time Dudley had left the house. "Maybe if I'm lucky, he'll get spooked when the dementors' chill hits. Maybe he'll think I'm doing it and run home."

"But is he safe there?" Asked Boris.

"Probably not. But dementors can't go through walls. As long as the idiots don't let the bloody things in, they'll be fine." Harry said.

"Are we heading anywhere in particular?" Asked the snake.

"The park. It's sort of in a corner lot. It'd be hard for the dementors to come from behind me." Harry said.

"Yes, but it also means you'd be easily cornered."

"True. But I don't plan to stay in one place when the chill hits me."

"And your cousin?"

Harry sighed. "Dudley had better learn to run faster. Dunno why those idiots want him to follow me, anyway. I can outrun him and he'd never get into Nymmy's house."

"Your aunt probably thinks the exercise could do him good, if nothing else." Suggested Boris.

Harry snorted. "Maybe. And maybe the thought of Dudley getting me alone so he could try to beat me up has him all motivated to do as he's told."

"Not that you'd let him, of course."

"Of course. I'm faster than him and I've faced far, far worse than him. After what I went through this year, I'm pretty sure I could face down anything." Harry said.

"Anything save for the most obvious?"

"Shut up. I'll beat Tom down again eventually. I just hope I can get the strength to beat him quickly. The less time he has to kill and regain power, the better." Harry murmured, eyes downcast. "So help me, if he targets any of my friends..."

"Don't." Said Boris. *"Don't go down that line of thought. You'll get worked up and you need to be alert right now."*

"Yeah... I know. Sorry. It's just a bit overwhelming, you know?"

"I know."

Harry slid his hands into his pockets. "Why the hell can't I have a normal life? Why can't I stay at Nymmy's house all summer? Why does trouble seem to actively hunt me down? I just want a nice, relaxing year at Hogwarts. Persistent bastard. Why couldn't he stay dead?"

"Because evil is something that no one can truly rid the world of." Said Boris. *"My master may have been killed but his legacy lives on. I know his secrets and have passed many on to you. The Eximo and the Laniatus... I had hope to never see or speak of them again."*

"I'm glad you opened up, though." Said Harry. "I just hope I can prove that it wasn't a bad decision."

"I'm sure you will." Boris said.

The two went silent then, each wrapped up in their own thoughts. The sun was now descending beyond the horizon, leaving everything tinged in reds and golds. It was only slightly darker out when Harry reached the park.

"*Harry.*" Boris hissed quickly.

"What?"

"*Look up.*"

"Wh... oh hell." Harry whispered. There, sitting on a swing and staring down at the ground, was Tonks. Her hair was short, spiky, and its natural color. Her eyes were too far closed for Harry to tell what color they were, but he had a good idea. She had on some faded blue jeans and a button-up blue top. "Unexpected element. Not good. Oi... *OI, TONKS!*"

Tonks jumped, startled by someone shouting her name. Her eyes immediately lit up when she saw Harry running her way, however, and got to her feet just as he reached her. "Harry! What're you doin' out?"

"Couple reasons." Harry said. "We need to get back to your house, though. It isn't safe out here."

"Oh don't you start too." Tonks said, looking away. "Mum was trying to keep me from coming here by saying that."

"She was right, but for completely different reasons. I think a couple of dementors are going to be arriving around here before long." Harry said.

"What?! Why would you think that?" Asked Tonks.

"I got a letter." Harry said. "And... and I trust the person who wrote it. He warned me that Voldemort's goons were going to send at least two to Privet Drive. I stayed at Number Four as long as I dared. We need to get to your house, Nymmy."

"I... yeah, okay. Who wrote you, though?" Asked Tonks as Harry took her hand and started out of the park again.

"I can't say." Harry murmured. "It was the guy Pansy mentioned to me, though. And even if his letter was a lie, I'm playing it safe."

Squeezing Harry's hand, Tonks whispered, "I'm sorry we haven't visited. We... Dumbledore's been acting funny. He told us we had to stay in. That we shouldn't write you."

"What?! Why?" Harry asked, brow creased.

"Dunno. Wouldn't say. Felt horrible, though. Figured you'd be mad at me." Tonks said, staring down at the street as they crossed it.

"Not mad. Never mad." Harry said. "Confused, yes. Worried, yes. Upset, yes. But not mad."

"Not much difference between 'upset' and 'mad,' Harry."

"There is with me." Harry said.

"You know we're being followed by a whale?"

"Yeah. Don't like that any, either. Hoping he'll go away when we reach your house and get back to Number Four before the dementors arrive." Harry said. "If Voldemort or one of his followers has gained enough control to give the dementors specific orders on what street and what house to attack, they should also only come after *me*. I'm hoping that, anyway."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I'll feel bad. But it'll mean I'll never have to live there again. I'm not going to spend months mourning the loss." Harry said, eyes hard.

"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm getting cold..."

"...Cold or *COLD*?" Asked Harry, coming to a stop.

"*COLD*." Said Tonks, looking nervously up at Harry.

The two looked around the neighborhood they were in. It was only a few blocks away from Number Nine, but it felt like they were miles from safety to Harry. The dementors practically glided across things and moved faster than he knew he could run. Harry let go of Tonks' hand, reaching into his back pocket and drawing his wand, turning it around so it wasn't readily visible. The letter had been right - he'd rather get in trouble than lose his soul. And he would rather lose his soul than to have anything happen to Tonks.

"I can't see them. I hate when I can feel them but can't see them." Harry whispered. "...We need to go. Now!"

The two started running, looking over their shoulders occasionally and trying not to get distracted by the large numbers of shadows being cast by the setting sun. Harry scrambled to a halt at the end of the road, twisting to grab hold of Tonks to stop her as well. Before she could protest, he hushed her and pointed down the road to the east. As Tonks looked, she saw what could have been the tail end of a dementor disappearing behind a house. She sucked in a sharp breath and looked back to Harry, who was scanning the road they had just come up.

"I hope to god Dudley turned and ran the other way. I don't see him." Harry said, his voice quiet.

"What're we gonna do? We need to go that way!" Tonks said, her voice higher than normal.

"Back yards, if you think you can get over the fences quick enough." Harry said. "Those would at least slow the dementors down."

"Glad I don't wear dresses." Tonks said, staring down at her jeans. "I'm game if you are. But you'll have to lead the way."

"I know more than one way to your house." Harry said, offering the girl a reassuring smile. "...Kinda sad I won't land in your yard to see you in a bikini again, though."

"Oh, be serious!" Tonks said, swatting Harry on the arm. "Come on, you jackass, let's get going!"

"Yeah, sorry. Trying to ease the tension a bit." Harry said, still smiling faintly. "Besides, I'm gonna need to dredge up happy memories if I have to use a Patronus."

"Me in a bikini is a happy moment, huh? Define 'happy' in this sense." Tonks said as she and Harry began to move again.

"There's no way to answer that that won't get me punched." Harry said, leading Tonks towards the chain link fence of a pale-blue house. "Okay, we need to go a block this way and then turn north again. Should be the quickest route. Watch the fourth yard - there's a small, yappy-type dog there."

"How big is it?" Asked Tonks.

"Small. It's not the size I'm worried about, though." Harry said, vaulting over the fence.

"Things are off to an early start this year." Tonks muttered as she followed behind.

When they had almost reached the final yard - the little dog being inside that particular night, much to Harry's relief - they heard the noise of a chain link fence being moved. Harry jerked his head around. "...Dudley. Shit."

"He's still following us?! Oh damn." Tonks said, turning to look back.

Dudley was indeed still following them, though the amount of time he took to scale the fence was almost comical. Harry hesitated, his wand hand growing twitchy. "We can't wait for him, Nymmy. We've gotta go."

"Right."

"At least we know he's still after us. It'll help if we need to send someone out. Gonna call Dumbledore when we get to your house."

He'll know what to do, providing he's not trying to ruin my summer still." Harry growled as he and Tonks resumed their fence-hopping.

"I don't think he'd ignore a threat like this." Said Tonks.

"Yeah, well, I'd still love to know what the hell he's playing at, telling you lot that you couldn't visit me. I swear, one of these days, I'm going to kick him square in the bollocks and take a picture as he crumples!"

"Oh let's not talk about Dumbledore's bits!" Tonks whined.

The two turned north at the end of the street, continuing through the back yards until they reached Tonks' house's. Tonks quickly ran up to the back door and threw it open, waving for Harry to hurry in. Harry paused only to look back down the row of yards. Dudley wasn't visible anywhere. Figuring he was still working on the previous street's worth, Harry turned to go inside, thankful that they had made it safely.

But just as he reached the door, a horrible noise forced him to halt, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up.

Dudley was screaming.

Chapter 2 – Pain in the Dark

"Inside!" Harry yelled, darting past Tonks into the house. She followed, quickly closing the door behind her. Her mother was still at work and wouldn't be home for at least another few hours. She ran after Harry after locking the door, finding him grabbing at some powder above the fireplace.

"Albus Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry!" Harry said as he threw the powder.

At first, he was worried that nothing had happened. But then, thankfully, the face of the headmaster appeared in the flames. "...Harry?"

"Professor, there are dementors here! I think they've gotten Dudley! We need some help!" Harry said, trying to get his breathing under control.

"Dementors? Are you sure?" Asked Dumbledore, looking worried.

"We saw them. We heard Dudley scream just as we were about to enter the house!"

"Stand back." Said Dumbledore.

A few moments later, the headmaster appeared properly through the flames. He paused as he started to look at Harry. "...Where did you hear your cousin's scream coming from?"

"Down the road. We took the back yards through this street's neighborhood and the last. We didn't see him down this set. He must still be back there somewhere!" Harry exclaimed.

"I will find him and deal with anything that may be roaming. Stay inside and lock the door behind me. I would also recommend locking any other entrances to the house. I can get back in on my own when I return." Said Dumbledore as he strode towards the front door.

Harry did as Dumbledore asked, locking the front door as he left and running upstairs and locking the bedroom windows. When he came

back down, Tonks lobbed a can of soda his way, which he gratefully took, taking a long drink.

"I'm glad he didn't dismiss me." Harry said after swallowing. "He can handle anything that's out there..."

Tonks shivered as she walked up, hugging at herself. "I hope so. ...I'm gonna go get ahold of mum and tell her she needs to come home."

"Good idea. I wish I could be out there with Dumbledore, but..."

"Yeah. Not a good plan." Tonks said. "You gonna go watch for him?"

"I think I will, yeah." Harry said.

The two entered the living room, Tonks heading for the fireplace and Harry for the window. Pulling the curtains back slightly he peered out, watching. Moments later, he heard Tonks call out the name of her mother's office. Andromeda's head appeared in the fire shortly after.

"Nymmy? Is something wrong?" Asked Andromeda.

"Well, if you consider dementors being on the loose around these parts..." Tonks started.

"Dementors?! Nymmy, what...?"

"Someone wrote a letter, warning Harry. He's here, by the way. So is Dumbledore. He's out looking around. We think the dementors might have found Harry's cousin, who was following us. We saw one of them, mum. It was only briefly, but we saw one. We felt them, too. We've got the house locked down like Dumbledore told us to, but..."

"I'll be there in a minute. I need to grab some things and tell my boss you're not feeling good." Said Andromeda. "Stay put, do you hear me?"

"Yes, mum." Tonks said, walking over to the window as the flames died down. Wrapping her arms around him from behind, she whispered, "Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"Think we can get someone to apparate us to Hawaii?"

"Hawaii?"

"Anywhere's better than here. Wanna go to the beach. Wanna relax."

"So do I." Harry sighed. "So do I, Nymmy."

Andromeda stepped out of the fireplace some five minutes later, rushing over and hugging the teens. "Is Albus still out?" She asked.

"Yeah. Haven't seen or heard anything in awhile." Harry said, glancing back to the window. "I hate this. I hate waiting and not knowing what's happening!"

"It'll be alright. Albus knows what he's doing." Andromeda said.

"Yes, so it would seem." Harry said darkly.

"He knows?" Asked Andromeda, looking at her daughter, who nodded. "Yes, I'm not very happy with it either, Harry. But he must have his reasons."

"Aside from making me miserable?" Asked Harry, peering back out the window.

"Aside from that, yes." Andromeda said. "I should probably go out and look around, too."

"No!" Tonks cried. "You aren't going anywhere! He can handle it!"

"I *am* capable of conjuring a Patronus, Nymmy." Andromeda said.

"Not the point!" Tonks argued.

Suddenly, Harry sucked in a sharp breath, his body tensing up. It caused both Tonks women to turn and look at him.

"What is it?" Asked Andromeda.

"No." Harry whispered. "...Damn it!"

Harry ran from the living room, unlocking the front door and throwing it open. He met the headmaster halfway across the front lawn. "What the hell happened?!"

Dumbledore looked down at Harry sadly. Behind him floated Dudley's body, his eyes glazed over. "I was too late." He said. "Come. Let's not stand out here."

The headmaster set Dudley's body down on the couch, sighing quietly as he did so. "I went the way you suggested, Harry. The boy was curled in the corner of the yard. I did not see anything around him, though. Sadly, the dementors had already fed. There was no chance to reach him in time. I am sorry. I went to hunt the dementors down, took care of them, and returned to get your cousin."

"It isn't your fault." Harry said quietly, staring at his cousin. "...How many were there?"

"Two." Said Dumbledore.

"Just like the letter said." Tonks whispered.

"Letter?" Asked Dumbledore. "What letter might this be?"

"I got a letter the other day." Harry said. "It was... from a friend. He warned me someone in Voldemort's ranks would be sending dementors after me. I was hoping it was a fake or something. But he said there would probably be two, but that I should expect more."

"And who was his friend?" Asked Dumbledore.

"...He said he didn't want me to tell anyone, but he also said he would go over my head and speak to you directly if I wouldn't believe him." Harry said. "...Hey, Nymmy?"

"Yeah, yeah. I get the idea. We can leave the room if you want." Tonks said.

"Sorry. But his letter probably saved me. I should respect his wishes. And having the headmaster know will help me get it out of my system so I won't accidentally tell anyone else." Harry said.

"It's alright, Harry. We understand." Said Andromeda. Putting a hand on her daughter's shoulder, she continued, "Let's go get something to drink. Anyone think they'll feel up to a meal tonight?"

"I probably will later." Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "I'd like to say this has me upset, but... it's very hard to be that caring for someone who has spent most of his life trying to break your bones."

Andromeda nodded, escorting Tonks from the room. When they were in the kitchen, Harry collapsed down into one of the room's chairs, fishing in his pocket for the letter and handing it to Dumbledore, who straightened the crumpled parchment out before letting his eyes scan it. His eyebrows raised slightly when he reached the end. Once he finished, he balled up the letter and tossed it into the fireplace. Harry reached into his other pocket, drew out the envelope, and did the same.

"I am surprised you believed him." Said Dumbledore.

"He risked his life writing me, sir. It was the least I could do."

"You never cease to amaze me, Harry." Dumbledore said, smiling.

"Which brings up why you feel the need to have me cut off from my friends."

Dumbledore sighed then, walking over to Harry. "It is because too many harmful things could get through. We have been scanning the letters sent to you this year, ensuring that nothing unsavory is in them. I do apologize, though. I should have said something."

"So how did *that* letter get through?" Harry asked, nodding towards the fireplace.

"A very good question." Said Dumbledore. "I will have to ask the writer himself the first chance I get!"

"...Yeah, okay. I can see the need for keeping me safe. But yeah, it would've been nice had you send Fawkes or something with a letter explaining the situation at least. Or just have him bring the letters directly." Harry grumbled. "...What're we going to do about Dudley?"

"We will, of course, have to return him to his parents." Said Dumbledore. "And we will have to explain what has happened to him."

"I was afraid you were gonna say that. But... sir, shouldn't we get some more people here? There might be more dementors out there somewhere. Better to be safe than sorry." Harry said.

"I am sure I could arrange that, yes." Dumbledore said.

"Really?" Harry said, eyebrows raising. He hadn't expected Dumbledore to go along with the idea. "You... you'll really do that?"

Dumbledore smiled. "As you have said, there may be more lurking out there. And it would be a tragedy if more innocent lives were taken tonight. While I did not sense that there were, perhaps it is best to play it safe. Go into the kitchen and try to relax. I will call in some favors and be back as quickly as I can."

Harry nodded, slowly getting to his feet. "I... thank you, sir. And... sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"Do you think you could bring me some Dreamless Sleep for tonight? I'm not sure how well I'll be able to sleep after this..." Harry said, looking back at his cousin.

"I don't think it will be a problem. Now go - have something to drink, try to eat something. I will take care of the rest." Said Dumbledore kindly as he approached the fireplace.

Harry nodded again, turning to head into the kitchen. As he opened the door, the familiar sound of flames rising filled the air. The Tonks women were at the table, mugs of blue liquid in front of them. As

Harry walked over, he told them what Dumbledore was going to do. As he sat, he then asked, "What're you drinking?"

"Blue Stuff." Tonks replied.

"Well... yeah, but what is it?" Asked Harry.

"Blue Stuff." Said Andromeda.

"...Yes, I believe I can see that it's blue stuff. But what IS it?"

"No no no." Andromeda said, aiming her wand across the room and floating over a large, plastic bottle. Inside was a blue-colored liquid that was, apparently, some sort of berry flavored soda. The name was, of course, 'Blue Stuff.'

"Oh. Well pour me some, would you? I've got an awful headache at the moment." Harry said, slumping down in his chair.

"A third cup of Blue Stuff coming up." Said Andromeda, smiling slightly as she summoned another glass to the table. "Here you go, dear. Are you feeling alright?"

"As well as I can be, I suppose, given the situation. Kind of unnerved that I'm not more upset still." Harry said, taking the glass and trying a sip of the liquid within. His face immediately screwed up. "Eeyagh, this stuff is *bitter!*"

"Good wake-up juice." Andromeda said.

"You shouldn't worry too much about how you feel." Tonks said. "He's still alive, after all. Just not all there."

"Yeah. But 'not all there' isn't going to be good enough for the Dursleys. Frankly, I dunno if it's good enough for me, either. I think I'd rather he had been killed than to have him reduced to being soulless." Harry said, nursing his glass of Blue Stuff. "I'm not going to enjoy heading back to Number Four with Dumbledore."

"I assume you'll be heading back later tonight?" Asked Andromeda.

"Probably." Harry said. "Ugh... man, couldn't this stuff happen after the holiday is over?"

"Like I said, stuff's off to an early start this time." Tonks said, taking a long drink of her soda.

"Speaking of things off to an early start..." Began Andromeda, fixing a look on Harry.

"Uh-oh." He said. "You... noticed?"

"Oh yeah. I think we need to have a little talk."

Harry let out a groan.

"Nymmy seems to be very quiet on the matter when I asked her about it." Said Andromeda.

"And I'm supposed to be more vocal?" Asked Harry. "You already know!"

"Yes, but I'd like to hear it from one of *you*." Andromeda said.

"Was a late Christmas present." Harry said, staring down at his blue soda. "Sirius and Moony brought it."

"Oh? And just how much did you spend?"

"Mum!" Tonks exclaimed, glaring at her mother.

"Simply hoping he didn't spend *too* much of his money, that's all." Andromeda said, holding up her hands.

"I've got more than I could ever spend." Harry said. "Wanted to get her something special."

"So it would seem. But you're skirting the issue."

"...Do I have to say?" Asked Harry, glancing up through his eyelashes at Andromeda.

"You don't *have* to, no. But I'd prefer if you did."

Harry groaned. "...You're gonna be mad."

"I promise I won't." Andromeda said. "...It was a lot, wasn't it?"

"Oh yeah." Tonks said quietly, gazing down at her left hand. The ammolite gemstone in the ring seemed to shine for a moment.

"...Fifteen thousand." Harry whispered eventually.

"Fifteen **THOUSAND**?" Andromeda repeated, eyes wide. "Good lord!"

"Toldja." Harry mumbled.

"I'm not mad, it's just... that's..." Andromeda sputtered.

"It's spelled." Harry explained, looking up.

"It is?" Said Andromeda.

"It is?" Said Tonks.

The two women looked at one another before turning back to Harry.

"Erk. Um... yeah. It is." He said. "It... yeah, there's a good dozen heavy protection charms on that thing."

"Cool." Tonks said, staring at her ring again.

"I think I'm going to need to corner Sirius and talk to him about this." Andromeda said a few minutes later. Drawing in a deep breath, she continued, "Still, I know full well what this all means. I just wanted you to know I'm perfectly fine with it. Both of you."

"You are?" Asked Harry and Tonks in unison.

"I am." Andromeda said, smiling at Harry now. "Surprised by how early it happened, but fine with it nonetheless. I kind of figured it might some day."

"Does that mean I can curl up next to him tonight?" Asked Tonks. "Tired of hugging that dumb pillow."

"Is that what that was about?" Andromeda asked, tilting her head as she looked at her daughter again. "Was wondering why you were so insistent on a body pillow..."

"Well Dumbledore kinda screwed over my plans of having the real one there." Tonks said, making a face.

"I take it this means you've spent time curled up together in bed." Andromeda said.

"Um... yes?" Said Tonks. At the look on her mother's face, she waved her hands quickly. "It was just sleeping!"

"Just?"

"Just! I promise!" Tonks said.

"It was." Harry finally chimed in quietly. "It... she's the main reason I never wound up in the hospital - Hogwarts' or otherwise - after Voldemort was brought back. Having her there helped to keep the nightmares away..."

Andromeda sighed softly, getting up and walking around the table. "How have you been since?"

"Since summer started? ...About as well as can be expected. Slept about three hours a night at best, been sleeping on my stomach so I could scream into the pillow if I had a nightmare." Harry said, shrugging. "I've had better days."

"See. He needs me." Tonks said, pouting.

"...So it would seem. I'll allow it, but only on the condition that you promise to keep the door open." Said Andromeda, putting a hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezing gently. "If it helps both of you sleep better, I don't see a reason why I should forbid it."

"Thanks..." Harry said. "...You know, I'd really be perfectly happy with going to bed right now. What's taking Dumbledore so long? Even if there were more dementors around before, they're probably long gone by now."

"Dunno." Andromeda said. "Want to head into the living room to wait? Or would you rather stay in here to avoid...?"

"I'll be alright." Harry said. "I've seen worse, unfortunately."

"Unfortunate isn't the right word." Andromeda said, squeezing Harry's shoulder again before stepping away so he could stand. "Let's bring the soda in. If we don't hear from Albus soon, I'll try getting ahold of him again."

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As it turned out, Dumbledore calling 'some' favors equated to amassing a task force nearly two dozen strong. The headmaster apologized for taking so long, as he didn't return until nearly a half hour later. After a bit of wand-waving, the people Dumbledore had called had all apparated in or around Number Nine's living room.

"Kingsley!" Tonks cried, recognizing one of the taller men in the crowd.

"Hey there, Pinwheel." Said Kingsley Shacklebolt, grinning as Tonks ran over and hugged him. "How're you holding up?"

"I've had better summers." Tonks said, stepping back and smiling tiredly at the man.

"So it would seem." Kingsley said, looking down at Dudley's body. "So this is Potter's cousin, huh?"

"Cousin, mutated rhino, whichever." Harry said dryly, stepping through the crowd with Andromeda to reach Tonks.

"I can see you aren't too upset at the loss." Kingsley said, eyebrow raising.

"The Dursleys aren't exactly a pleasant lot." Harry said, shrugging. "You and Nymmy know each other?"

"Kingsley and I have been friends for ages." Andromeda said, smiling at the man. "He used to babysit Nymmy when she was little."

"Oh. You have my sympath--OW!" Harry said, getting slugged in the arm by Tonks.

Kingsley laughed. "She hasn't changed much, I see. Pinwheel always was a handful."

"Pinwheel?" Harry asked, grinning aside at Tonks, who had developed a sudden interest in the carpet.

"Used to cartwheel everywhere when she was little. And when she wasn't doing that, she was spinning 'round in place." Explained Kingsley, chuckling at Tonks' embarrassment. "Has she grown out of it, Andi?"

"About six years back, yes." Andromeda said. "So what's your roll in tonight's little get-together?"

"Leading one of the two teams out on a search." Kingsley said, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "Albus explained the situation to us when he called. I gathered a few of the men on my squad to help out."

"Squad?" Asked Harry.

"Kingsley's an Auror." Tonks said.

"Ahh."

Minutes later, Dumbledore had quieted the crowd down and told them where they should try concentrating their searches. One team was to position half its members at Number Four while the rest searched outward from its location. The other would start there at the Tonks residence and work their way out. Once they were sure that no dementors were still lingering, they were to report in. Likewise, should any of them drive off a dementor, they were to report in once they were sure it wouldn't be coming back.

Kingsley gave the Tonks women a wave before he lead his team out. Dumbledore had gone out with the teams to help monitor their progress and to assist them if necessary. When they had all cleared out, Harry collapsed into one of the living room's chairs.

"What a day..."

Tonks sat on the chair's arm. "Hopefully nothing's still out there."

"Yeah. Hopefully." Harry said, closing his eyes. "I'm more worried about dealing with the rest of the Dursleys."

"Why do you have to go? Can't Dumbledore go on his own?" Asked Tonks.

"I need to get my things, Nymmy. Even if I didn't want to return, it would be safest with the headmaster there, despite the reactions that will probably occur." Harry said.

"Oh. Damn. I forgot about your stuff..."

"I'm gonna be ready to sleep for a week when I get back." Harry muttered.

"I'll make sure your bed's ready." Andromeda said. "Don't worry about sleeping too long. I think it's justified in this case."

"Just hope I can *stay* asleep." Harry said, opening his eyes again. "I really don't need to have nightmares the one time I really need a good night's rest. Hopefully Dumbledore's brought some Dreamless Sleep for me."

"Well, whatever happens, I'll be there. No worries." Tonks said.

"Thanks, Nymmy." Harry said, smiling wanly.

"Just wish th--" Tonks began. But she was interrupted as the front door opened. The two Tonks women and Harry got to their feet as Dumbledore entered.

"We have had to run off three more so far." Said Dumbledore. "Though something is troubling about the situation."

"Oh great. What?" Harry asked.

"None of us felt the typical chills until they were very near." Said Dumbledore. "Whether this is something they were doing on their

own or whether the operative of Voldemort's had spelled them is currently unknown."

"Great. So how the heck are we supposed to know when they're *gone*?" Harry asked.

"The people I have gathered have agreed to remain on patrol until morning. The dementors won't stay in the light if it can be helped." Said Dumbledore. "It should be safe after that. I feel they will flee before dawn approaches."

"So we're going to take Dudley's body back over to Number Four knowing full well more dementors could be out there?" Asked Harry.

"That is what it boils down to, yes." Said Dumbledore. "I have informed the team leaders of this, and there is a safe route that has been set up. We may go any time you'd like, Harry."

"...Let's get it over with." Harry said. "The sooner, the better. I just want to go to sleep."

"Very well." Dumbledore said. He walked over to the couch and, with the flick of his wand, had Dudley levitating again. "Then let us go."

"Sir? Did you do anything to Dudley when you got him? He's been very quiet. That doesn't seem to mesh with what I've read on dementors..." Harry said.

"The results vary from victim to victim. There is currently no way to tell how a person will end up after having his or her soul removed." Said Dumbledore. "I am sure he will 'wake up' so to speak, but I highly doubt he will be very vocal or mobile from this point on."

"He wasn't very mobile to begin with." Harry muttered. "Okay, well... let's go."

"Good luck." Tonks whispered, kissing Harry on the cheek.

"Thanks." Harry said, sounding very tired.

Tonks sighed as Harry and Dumbledore left, Dudley's body bobbing unnaturally behind them. "Why does everything have to happen to Harry, mum?"

"I wish I knew, sweetie. I wish I knew."

Chapter 3 – Chaos Control

"This feels weird. Aside from it being dark out, how can we be sure no one's looking?" Asked Harry as he and Dumbledore walked up the sidewalk.

"Our lookouts are keeping a series of simple wards up. Anyone on these streets who happens to glance outside will merely see a nice, peaceful summer night." Said Dumbledore softly. "Harry? Would you like me to handle everything with your relatives? Or would you like to be there when I explain what has happened?"

"I...want to be there." Harry said. "I think I need to be there."

"As you wish. You may leave at any time you wish, though. You do not have to commit to the whole encounter." Said Dumbledore.

"Thank you, sir." Harry said, hands slipping into his pockets. "I'm gonna need to get my things from my room before we leave, though."

"I had guessed you would." Said Dumbledore. "I do not know how long we will be there, but I will try to keep things as calm as possible."

"Good luck." Harry muttered. "You know they're going to blame me for this, right?"

"Most likely, yes." Said Dumbledore. "I will do everything in my power, however, to keep that blame away from you. As, after all, there was nothing you could do."

"There was, though. If I had stayed behind just a *bit*... If I had just been able to send a Patronus back that way..." Harry whispered.

"We both know how much trouble you would get into if that had happened. Aside from the two I initially got rid of, who knows how many might have been there, just out of range, so to speak? You cannot save everyone, Harry. I am afraid it is something we all have to come to terms with now that Voldemort has returned. Even I know I am incapable of saving everyone. It is not easy, but nobody has ever claimed life was a simple journey." Dumbledore said, looking aside at the Ravenclaw.

"I know. And I'm glad I called you and you got all of those people together. ...Sir? Do you mind me asking a question?"

"By all means."

"Are they members of the Order of the Phoenix?"

Dumbledore's eyebrows raised slightly.

Harry smiled faintly up at him. "Moody." He said.

"Ahh." Dumbledore responded, nodding slowly. "I see. Alastor spoke of the Order, did he? Yes, Harry, they are members of the Order of the Phoenix."

"We both know what I'm thinking. Should I go ahead and say it or do you just want to nix the idea before I ask?" Asked Harry.

"I think you should concentrate on your upcoming year at Hogwarts and let *us* worry about the war for now, Harry." Dumbledore said.

"Yeah, that's about what I figured you'd say." Harry murmured. "...Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"What would of happened if I *had* cast my Patronus?"

"Well, you would have received a letter from the Ministry stating you would go on trial for underaged magic." Dumbledore said. "A rather simple process, really, but given that Cornelius would be presiding over the court and the two of you have never had what one would call a friendly relationship..."

"Yeah, no good there. ...It's weird, not feeling that bad. I'm sad I couldn't stop it, but I'm not upset that he'll never beat me up again." Harry said. "...Though I'm sure Vernon will give it the old college try next summer..."

"Not if he knows what is good for him." Said Dumbledore, a slightly hard edge to his voice. "That they have harmed you as much as they

have is a testament to how wrong I was to put you there. Sadly, the blood wards must be regenerated every year."

"Which leads me to ask why I even need them. Doubt they would have kept the dementors out." Harry said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. But you must understand, Harry - the wards are powerful old magic."

"Yes, but no matter how strong the wards are, they couldn't keep out Voldemort if he came calling personally." Harry said. "I'm begging you, sir - ward the Tonks' house. Or take them someone more safe. I'd worry about her mother being in danger where she is if she remained there."

"Actually, I was planning to ask Andromeda if she would mind the three of you staying somewhere else for the remainder of the summer." Said Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling.

"Really? Where would we go, though?" Asked Harry.

"Somewhere I think you would enjoy." Said Dumbledore. "I will speak it over with the current owner of the location and get his thoughts on the matter. Tomorrow morning, I will call and let you know."

"Sounds like a plan." Harry said. "So... who owns it?"

Dumbledore smiled. "Ah ah, Harry. If I said, it would spoil the surprise."

"You're no fun at all." Said Harry, a faint smile on his own face.

"Well, Harry... here we are." Said Dumbledore, looking up.

Blinking, Harry looked up. "...So we are. Guess I wasn't paying attention."

"A good way to get one's mind off of something is a strong distraction." Said Dumbledore, walking up towards the front door. "Now then, Harry, if you would stand behind both myself and your

cousin, I will take the lead. Best not let them have direct access at you as we enter."

"Good plan." Harry said, falling back behind the headmaster. As Dumbledore rang the doorbell to the house, Harry glanced around at the neighborhood. Every two or three houses, he could spot figures moving about on the roofs. 'Order members,' He thought.

Vernon was the one to answer the door. He immediately backpeddled when he saw Dumbledore. "Wh-wh-what are you doing here?! ...Dudley! Let go of my son at once!"

"I am afraid I cannot do that just yet." Said Dumbledore, stepping into the house and motioning for Harry to follow. Vernon was standing again by the time Harry got the door closed. "If you would collect your wife and join us in your living room...?"

"I demand you let my son go!" Vernon roared, his meaty hands balling into fists.

"Oh, shut up and do what he says." Harry muttered darkly.

"Harry." Admonished Dumbledore.

"Don't you tell *me* what to do!" Vernon said, glaring at Harry.

"Someone has to." Harry said. "Professor, I think I'm going to go get packed up after all. I don't think I'd be able to keep my calm around them right now."

"As you wish, Harry. Now then," Dumbledore said, turning back to Vernon, "Your wife?"

"...Petunia!" Vernon called, glaring daggers at Dumbledore as he shouted.

"What *are* you making such a racket abo--" Petunia started, coming out from the kitchen with a scowl on her face. She came to a halt when she saw Dumbledore. "...You."

"Me." Said Dumbledore, nodding slightly. "Now then, if you two would follow me into your living room, I can begin explaining what happened to your son."

"Dudley!" Squeaked Petunia, her eyes wide.

Harry watched as Dumbledore stepped into the living room, his aunt and uncle following cautiously behind. Blowing out a sigh, he headed the rest of the way up the stairs and into his room. Looking over at Hedwig as he entered, he said, "Gonna get noisy downstairs soon, girl. I'll let you out to fly so you won't have to listen to it."

Hedwig hooted softly as Harry pushed open the window. Opening the door to the snowy owl's cage, Harry smiled crookedly, "There are friends on the rooftops, Hedwig. They're keeping a safe route open between here and Tonks' house. Go on over there. I'll be back before too long. I hope."

Hedwig nipped gently at Harry's finger before taking flight. Harry watched her fly into the night. Just as she was out of sight, he heard his aunt screech from downstairs. Wincing, he quickly went to stuff all of his belongings into his trunk. Knowing he shouldn't, he had to go see how his relatives were handling the news that their son no longer had his soul.

"--OUTRAGEOUS! YOU GO GET IT BACK RIGHT THIS INSTANT!"
Vernon was hollering as Harry stepped into the hall.

"I am afraid it would be impossible." Said Dumbledore, his voice gentle. "Once a dementor feeds, that is the end of it. Your son is still alive, but he will no longer be the same boy you have grown to know."

"Impossible my ass!" Said Vernon, getting to his feet. "I'll sue if you don't!"

"What do you want him to do? Try and extract a digested soul from a magical being that isn't even around anymore?" Asked Harry as he got to the bottom of the stairs. He stepped around and leaned back against them, looking into the living room and at his enraged uncle. "And how the hell do you think you'd sue? You'd be hauled off to a

mental institution. 'The magic man wouldn't bring my son's soul back after a soul-eating monster devoured it' wouldn't hold up in any court I know of."

"**YOU!**" Vernon roared. "It's *YOUR* fault!"

"*MY* fault? You're the idiot who made him follow me everywhere when I'd go out!" Harry said, his own voice raising. "If it's anyone's fault, it's your own you god damned tub of lard! Don't you blame me for your own screw-ups! I'm not some little kid you can push around as you see fit anymore!"

"Harry..." Said Dumbledore, glancing over his shoulder.

Vernon passed by the couch, storming towards Harry. "You will not speak to me in such a disrespectful manner any longer, boy!"

"Or you'll do what?" Asked Harry, eyes narrowing. "Try beating me up? The headmaster would hex you into the darkness of the night ten times before you'd get the chance. You can't touch me, you bastard."

Vernon grit his teeth. "You think he's faster than me, do you?"

"A snail is faster than you, Vernon." Harry said, stepping past his uncle.

But Vernon grabbed at the back of his shirt collar and yanked back on it hard, causing Harry to trip backwards. But Harry regained his balance before falling . His eyes were cold when they looked into his uncle's, however.

"If you ever touch me again, I'll *kill* you." Harry whispered. "Don't forget what I've already threatened to do to you. You think what Dudley got was bad? At least he won't be in pain. If you ever put your filthy hands on me again, I'll make you beg for mercy. Mercy that I would never grant you."

"That is far enough, I think." Dumbledore said, stepping between the two. He looked to Vernon. "Come and sit down."

"You will not order me about in my own damn house!" Vernon yelled. "And if you expect for even a second that we're taking that freak back in any longer, you're out of your mind!"

"We have been over this already." Said Dumbledore, his voice the only calm one in the house at the moment. "Harry must return every summer until he is of age."

"The hell he must!" Vernon snarled. "I'll kill him myself if he steps foot through our door again!"

"Hmph." Came Harry's voice. Dumbledore quickly turned, expecting the Ravenclaw to start his fight anew with his uncle. Instead, he was met with a sight that surprised him. Harry, arms crossed, was looking indifferently at his uncle, a slightly glazed look to his eyes. "It doesn't matter what you want. Memory charms can fix everything. I assume you'll be affecting them before we go, headmaster?"

"...Perhaps." Said Dumbledore, eyes twinkling rather madly. "But, if possible, I would like to settle things rationally like mature adults."

Harry smiled grimly. "Then you'll be here the rest of the night, I'm afraid. Things like rational thought and reason are beyond these two. You'd sooner get results from speaking to the spiders in the cupboard under the stairs."

"Be that as it may, I would still like to try. They will, of course, need to learn how to take care of their son from this point on." Dumbledore said, smiling at Harry, whose brow creased as the headmaster looked into his eyes.

"...How long have you been doing that?" Asked Harry, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

"A question I could ask of you as well." Said Dumbledore. "But we can discuss the ways of the mind at a later date. Mr. Dursley, if you would accompany me back into the living room?"

"As long as *he* stays out." Vernon growled, still glaring at Harry.

Harry shrugged and went to sit at the bottom of the stairs. He closed his eyes for a moment and, when they opened again, the glaze was gone from them. "Go ahead, sir. If it gets us out of here faster, I'm all for it."

It took nearly half an hour, as it turned out, before Dumbledore got back to his feet and headed towards Harry. Petunia seemed much more affected by the situation than Vernon did and even caused some surprise when she brought up Azkaban on her own. Harry had stared at her then, wondering how *she* knew of Azkaban. Vernon looked to want to ask her this question as well, but remained silent as she spoke.

"Gonna hafta explain that to me sometime." Harry whispered as he led Dumbledore up to his room. "How she knew about Azkaban and all."

"This night has brought up many questions, it would seem." Said Dumbledore. "I wasn't aware you knew of occlumency."

"Occlumency?"

Dumbledore frowned slightly. "Were you not using it when you calmed down earlier? You seemed to know I was trying to look into your mind."

"Huh? Oh... Boris has been having me meditate this summer." Harry explained. "Emotions have been a bit weird. Guess I'm finally feeling the effects of everything that happened last year."

Dumbledore shrunk Harry's chest, floating it over to him. "I see. Your snake must be very intelligent, then. He seems to be unwittingly teaching you a method to keep your mind clear and to keep others out of your mind."

"*Very intelligent is a good description of me.*" Said the snake sleepily from around Harry's right arm.

"Quiet, you." Harry said, looking at his sleeve. Looking back to Dumbledore, he tucked his trunk into his pocket when it got close. "Anyway, I'll have to have a little talk with him about that, then. He did

describe locking my emotions up if it helped keep me calm. He also said that it would be easier to think with a clear mind rather than a cluttered one. Occlumency, huh? ...Would you happen to have any books on the subject?"

"I would. I could bring them by any time you'd like." Said Dumbledore. "For now, however, let us get back to Andromeda's house. I think, Harry, that you are due for a long sleep."

"I'd love nothing more." Said Harry, yawning as the two walked back downstairs.

"Never come back." Vernon said as they walked towards the door.

"May the dementors find a way to get you tonight." Harry replied. "Because their punishment is less than the Death Eaters' would be."

Harry left Number Four without another word. The Order squads were still keeping their watch over the area. As they got to the end of the street, Kingsley Shacklebolt and another man stopped them.

"On your way back to Andi's house?" Asked Kingsley.

"Yes. Have your men spotted anything?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Nothing of note. There was a disturbance a few blocks away, but it turned out to be a man fighting with his rather large dog." Said Kingsley. "All in all, a quiet night."

"And let us hope it remains that way." Dumbledore said.

"We're going to go on patrol again once you and Potter get back to Andromeda's house." Said the other man.

"Very well. Be careful." Said Dumbledore.

Harry yawned again as they walked. "That mind thing takes a lot of energy, doesn't it?"

"It does. I am impressed you were able to calm yourself before your wild magic had a chance to gain dominance." Said Dumbledore.

"With the proper training, you will be able to keep even Voldemort out of your head."

"He can read minds?" Asked Harry.

"Legilimency isn't so much mind-reading as it is seeing a person's memories." Explained Dumbledore. "But that alone is quite dangerous. It can give the enemy dangerous knowledge of those you know and care about."

"Lovely." Harry muttered. "Man, I'm going to sleep for two days after I get into bed."

Dumbledore chuckled, patting Harry on the back. "And, barring any unforeseen circumstances, I am sure Andromeda would let you."

"Hope so." Harry said.

By the time they got to Number Nine, Harry was wondering how he was managing to even stand up. Thankfully, Tonks didn't fling herself at him when he entered. He gave her a tired smile.

"How did things go?" Asked Andromeda.

"'Bout as well as expected. Can I sleep for days now?" Groaned Harry.

Smiling, Andromeda nodded to her daughter. Tonks walked over and grabbed Harry's hand, tugging him towards the stairs. "C'mon. Your bed's all ready."

"Oh, I hate stairs." Harry grumbled as he let himself be tugged up towards the second floor.

"...What happened?" Whispered Andromeda, walking with Dumbledore towards the living room.

"Harry has managed to surprise me again, for one thing. The Dursleys, on the other hand, continue to disappoint me. Andromeda, I spoke with Harry as we walked - Sirius has given us his old family

house to use as a headquarters of sorts. It is warded and safe. There are more than enough rooms, as well."

"Is the place connected to the Floo network?" Asked Andromeda.

"Not at the moment. We are trying to figure out the best way to keep unwanted souls out right now." Dumbledore said. "You can leave the house and apparate to where you need to go, though."

"Is the house hidden then?"

"In a way, yes." Said Dumbledore. "Contact me when Harry wakes up - I'll tell Sirius that they should be expecting you within the coming days."

"He seemed really exhausted, Albus. Far more than he should have."

"Apparently, his snake is far more interesting than one would imagine it to be. It has taught him the very basics of occlumency. Harry was able to shut down his anger towards his uncle during a verbal bout. Once he had, his uncle could say nothing to get him riled up. I daresay teaching him further would prove greatly beneficial to the boy." Dumbledore explained.

"Occlumency? From a snake? ...I think I need some sleep, too." Andromeda said. "It's been a long day."

"So it has. Go then. The squads will stand watch until dawn. I will be apparating into the area to speak with them in the morning. Should any trouble arise during the night, you will be the first to know." Said Dumbledore, heading for the fireplace.

"You get some rest as well." Said Andromeda, fixing Dumbledore with a look. "Even great wizards need their shut-eye."

"It is perhaps a shame," Dumbledore said, grabbing a handful of Floo powder and calling the name of his office, "That I am not a great wizard, then. Good night, Andromeda."

"Good night, Albus." Andromeda said, rolling her eyes as the headmaster disappeared in a whirl of green flames. Groaning as she

allowed herself to stretch, Andromeda turned to head upstairs. She would check on the kids before turning in herself.

Looking in through the open doorway, she saw Harry sprawled out on his back, his arms around her daughter, who was curled up against him. She smiled as she turned and headed for her own bedroom. To think that he had proposed to her in such a manner. It really was sweet of him. He had spent more money than Andromeda - or any sane parent, for that matter - would have allowed him to.

Yes, she was going to need to have a very long talk with her dear cousin.

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Harry groaned as he flopped down on the bed. "Ohhh... my poor body."

Tonks crawled in next to him, laying on her side and propping her head up. "Mum said she'd let you sleep however long you wanted to. Did Dumbledore ever give you any Dreamless Sleep?"

"...He didn't. And I forgot to ask." Harry said, staring up at the ceiling. "...I think I'll be okay, though."

"You sure? I could go back downstairs and ask. Sounds like they're still talking." Tonks said.

Harry smiled. "I'm sure. Just being together with you should be enough to drive away any bad dreams. Come here."

Tonks giggled, scooting closer and snuggling up against Harry. "Mmm. Missed this..."

"So have I." Harry murmured, his arms slipping around the girl. "I believe I've forgotten how to sleep well without you next to me."

"Same here. That body pillow was a poor substitute. Glad you're here." Tonks whispered. "Can't believe mum didn't have a fit, though. About you an' me, I mean."

"Yeah. I really did expect her to flip out at least a little." Harry said. "Wonder if she thought we'd hook up eventually."

"Knowing her, probably." Tonks said. "...Speaking of, though - you never told me the ring was spelled! What kind of spells are on it?"

"Defensive. Most low-level spells shouldn't affect you anymore. Wouldn't go standing in someone's line of fire to *test* it, but..." Harry said, his eyes slipping shut.

"Was sweet of you." Tonks murmured, turning her head and kissing Harry's cheek. "...We're gonna fall asleep in what we have on, aren't we?"

"No energy to get back up." Harry mumbled. "Is it can be sleep time now please?"

Tonks giggled. "You're adorable when you're sleepy. Get some rest, silly."

"Sleep..." Harry cooed.

Tonks grinned as Harry's breathing quickly changed. He hadn't been kidding - he had drifted off pretty fast. She nestled her nose against his neck and moved her left arm up to his shoulder. She only barely registered the noise of her mother walking up the stairs a few minutes later. And, before long, her breathing fell in synch with Harry's.

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"Help me... help me...! **HELP ME!**"

Harry let out a cry as he jolted awake. It was light outside and Tonks wasn't next to him. He sighed as he sat up, clutching his chest. That stupid, spinning *gemstone* again! The voice was even louder than it had ever been before. Harry hadn't had any dreams about the pleading stone in ages. He was *happy* with that fact. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to when the dreams would occur, either.

"Harry! Are you okay?!" Asked Tonks as she raced into the room, her mother behind her.

"M'fine. Was just that weird, spinning gemstone asking for help again." Harry said. "But it was *loud* this time..."

"Glad it's just that and not anything worse." Tonks said, sitting on the edge of the bed and hugging Harry tightly. "How're you feeling?"

"...Rested. How long have I been asleep?" Asked Harry.

"About 35 hours, give or take. You slept through all of yesterday." Andromeda said.

"Thanks for letting me sleep." Harry said, cracking his neck to either side. "...Man, I'm starving."

"Good timing, then. We were just sitting down for breakfast." Tonks said. "C'mon, get up and come eat. You can wash up and change into something afterwards."

"I wouldn't say no to that plan." Harry said, slipping out of bed and stretching. His back let out a few particularly painful *POPs*. "Mmph... did I sleep on my back the entire time or something?"

"Yup." Tonks said. "I even came back in to sleep with you last night and you didn't move. Was worried I'd wake you up getting in and crawling out of the bed."

"Didn't feel a thing. Mostly didn't dream either, thankfully. Dumbledore must have figured I'd be too exhausted to dream. Speaking of, what happened with the guards stationed around the area?"

"Went home at dawn the next morning." Andromeda said. "No one reported any sightings and it's been clear since."

"Good. Nothing else to worry about this summer then." Harry said. "Maybe I can relax for awhile now."

"Ooh, can I tell him, mum?" Asked Tonks suddenly, grinning at her mother. "Can I?"

"Tell me what?" Asked Harry, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, dear. You can tell him." Said Andromeda, shaking her head and grinning.

"We're gonna be going to stay at Sirius' place the rest of the summer!" Tonks said.

"What?! Really?"

"Yup! Dumbledore talked to him and he was all for it. We were gonna wait until you woke up to call him, but he said Sirius kept bugging him about telling us." Tonks said, giggling. "We can leave anytime."

"How about tonight, then?" Asked Harry. "...How are we going to get to his place, anyway?"

"The plan is to side-along apparate you two. Albus will take you, Harry. I can do alright with one person, but two's a bit much." Andromeda said. "I thought I knew where the house was, but I'm having a bit of a tough time remembering. Albus said he'd explain when he came by, though. Right now, let's get some food in you."

"I'm going to have to force myself to wolf down things. ...Where's Boris, anyway?" Asked Harry.

"Sleeping on your dresser." Said Tonks. "I moved him over the morning after you fell asleep."

"Oh. Good. He's been pretty quiet lately. Was just wondering." Harry said. "I'll talk to him after I eat."

"He didn't say anything when you went back to the Dursleys?"

"Just one thing. Agreeing with Dumbledore that he must be smart." Harry said. "Kinda forgot he was there. Wonder why he wasn't talking. Hard to believe he was *asleep* the whole time, though."

"Dunno, mate. He's your quirky snake, not mine." Tonks said. "Anyway, food!"

"Yes, food!" Harry agreed.

"Come along, you two bottomless pits." Andromeda said, wheeling the teens into the kitchen.

Chapter 4 – Change of Scenary

Harry sat on the edge of his bed, staring across the room at Boris, who was still curled up on the dresser. "You've got some explaining to do, y'know."

"*Do I?*" Replied the snake.

"You never said you were teaching me occlumency. And why were you so quiet when we went back to the Dursleys'?" Asked Harry.

"*I never saw a reason to explain it beyond simple meditation. As for why I was silent, I simply had nothing to say. It was a very stressful evening for all involved.*" Said Boris, raising his head to look towards Harry. "*How are you feeling?*"

"Better now that I've slept and got some food in me." Said Harry, patting his stuffed stomach. "Maybe a bit *too* much food..."

"*So what is the plan for the rest of the summer? Remaining here?*" Asked Boris.

"Nah. We're apparently gonna head to Sirius' house." Said Harry, grinning now. "It'll be good to see him again. Moony's probably there too."

"*Ahh... Away from the madness of this part of the country, eh?*"

"Well, maybe. Dunno where his house *is* exactly. ...We're probably gonna be apparating. You gonna be alright with that?" Asked Harry.

"*I made it through a portkey travel before. I should have no problems with other means of magical travel.*" Said Boris, laying his head back down. "*Will we be returning to your relatives' house next summer?*"

"Not if I have any say in the matter. Blood wards be damned, I'm not going back there again. I don't see the point of the wards. It's doubtful that they would have kept the dementors out. And if they can't keep those things away, who's to say they would keep anything else out? No, I'm staying here come next summer. If Dumbledore wants me to go back there, he can jolly well collect me and take me back himself."

"A wise choice. I do not believe your family would be pleased to see you again." Said Boris.

"When have they ever been pleased to see me?" Asked Harry.

"Point. So, when are we leaving?"

"Tonight sometime. Dumbledore's gonna come by and collect us." Harry said. "Dunno how to kill the time, either. Logic dictates I should get *some* of my homework done, since I have a feeling I won't get much done at Sirius' place. My stomach dictates, however, that I should really take a nap and sleep all that food off. Merlin's bits, what was I thinking? You know, I think Nymmy and her mother made a bet before I woke up to see how much I could eat before getting sick."

"You can be a bit of a glutton when you're hungry. Understandable, mind you, as we snakes haven't exactly been light eaters, but still."

"Yeah. But I don't *want* to sleep anymore. I slept over a day without having been attacked or anything. Usually that kinda rest only happens in the hospital wing at school." Harry said, making a face. "Besides, I don't want to see that stupid blue gemstone begging for help anymore. Wish I knew what the hell it was."

"Perhaps you could spend your free time this year researching magical gems?" Suggested Boris.

"Dunno if I'll have a chance. Our O.W.L.s are this year. Lotta hard tests, apparently. I'll probably be swamped with schoolwork. Schoolwork and whatever the hell else decides to invade Hogwarts this time." Harry said.

"You don't know there will be trouble. From what you've told me, your third year was mostly problem-free." Said Boris.

"Mostly." Harry repeated. "Still had a lot on my mind. Anyway, even if nothing happens at the school, Voldemort's out there. Him and his boot-kissing followers. I wouldn't mind getting ahold of the one who set those dementors loose..."

"And what of your mysterious contact?" Asked Boris.

"Yeah. Gonna have to try and hunt him down at school, too. Easier said than done." Harry said, flopping back in bed and staring up at the ceiling. "He saved my life and he had no reason to. I refuse to believe it's a trap..."

"It could be an elaborate one. You don't know it isn't for sure." Boris stated.

"No, I do. He's not the type to do things on a whim. Maybe he saw things for what they really were." Harry pondered.

"Maybe. I'd be careful around him if I were you, though." Said Boris.

"Dumbledore knows too. He can't try anything with the headmaster keeping an eye on him, too." Harry said.

"If you say so. Still..."

"I'll be careful, Boris. I promise. Look, maybe we could find a guardian for the Pit to help keep me and my friends safe." Harry said, waving a hand vaguely in the air above him.

"A guardian? What do you mean?" Asked the taipan.

"Like the gargoyle statue that guards Dumbledore's office or something, I dunno. I haven't given it a whole lot of thought." Harry said.

"Statues can be broken." Boris pointed out.

"Okay, so something a bit tougher... I'll think about it. Maybe once we're at school I'll get an idea." Harry said.

"You'd better sit up. You'll end up falling asleep whether you want to or not if you lay like that for much longer." Boris said.

"Oh, shut up." Harry said, stretching his arms out. "I've earned some relaxation time."

"Ah, but would you rather spend it alone and asleep or with your girlfriend?" Asked the snake.

"...Ah, you're right. I should go on back downstairs. I told them I wanted to talk to you for a bit." Harry said, forcing himself to sit back up. "You wanna come with?"

"I'll pass, thanks." Boris said.

"I'll be back up when it's time to go this evening!" Harry said, standing and heading for the door. "Getting hungry?"

"I was fed while you were asleep." Boris said.

"Oh. Well that was nice of them." Harry replied, eyebrows raised slightly.

"Indeed. Especially since they can't understand me. We worked out a simple system, though. They would ask yes or no questions and I would either nod or shake my head in response. I can't complain too much. It got me another rat." Boris said.

"Let's hope we get Pettigrew one of these days." Harry said, voice low. "Not sure how he'd taste, though. ...Anyway, I'll stop thinking about *that* rat and head downstairs. Gotta keep my mind off that stuff if I'm ever going to try having a normal summer."

"Best of luck." Murmured Boris, eyes closing.

"Sweet dreams." Harry said, smirking as he turned and headed downstairs.

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"Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"What're ya thinkin' about?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing at all."

Tonks grinned, leaning against Harry and closing her eyes. "I'm glad you're awake. It was ruddy boring when you were out."

"It's good to *be* awake again." Harry said. "Boris had to convince me not to nap earlier, you know."

"Good thing you listened to him." Tonks said. "I woulda woke you up with ice cubes."

"You wouldn't have *dared*."

"You've known me for *how* long now?"

"Point. ...Wonder when Dumbledore's gonna show."

"Probably when we least suspect it." Tonks mumbled. "Tends to be his way."

"True. Not that I'm complaining, mind you, I just want to be away from the general area." Harry said.

"Understandable." Tonks said. "Hope it isn't until after our food settles though."

"Yeah, I'm stuffed. Again." Harry said, patting his stomach. "Urk..."

The two had finished eating dinner ten minutes ago and were now occupying the couch in the living room. Andromeda had had to pop in to work for a bit and had been gone over an hour. She had promised to return before Dumbledore dropped by, though Tonks and Harry both were baffled by this, as no one *ever* knew when Dumbledore would appear. He was quirky like that.

"Sirius' house..." Harry said quietly. "Wonder what it's like."

"Well," Tonks replied, lifting her head up and tilting it to the other side. "The Black family is pretty old. Wouldn't surprise me if it's a manor house of some sort. Plenty of room for us."

"And anyone we might need to spirit away to safety." Harry added.

"You thinkin' of your contact?" Asked Tonks.

"Yeah. I wish there was some way to get ahold of him. Gonna drive me barmy waiting for the ride to school." Harry said. "That said, if he makes it to school, there's no point in worrying. I can't write to Pansy, either, since she's openly admitted her parents are Death Eaters..."

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't?"

"Something like that."

Tonks leaned back against Harry. "Well, no point worrying about things you can do nothing about, right?"

"I suppose." Harry said, shrugging.

Tonks lightly bopped his arm. "No getting worried about stuff before we even get to school! You're going to look like Lupin does if you keep that up!"

"What, you don't think I'd look sophisticated with some greying hair?" Asked Harry, grinning crookedly.

"I think it's pointless to talk about since you could always just use your powers to change your hair *back*." Tonks said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh. Yeah. ...How the hell do I keep forgetting about that?" Harry wondered aloud.

"You're a blockhead, that's why." Tonks answered, smiling sweetly.

"I am not!"

"Are so."

"Not."

"So."

"Quiet, Nymmy."

Swat.

Harry chuckled. "Yeah, okay. I deserved that. ...You know, I wonder..."

"What?"

"Sirius hasn't ever really talked about his home to me before. Surely there's a reason for it. If he's living there now, it means it must be safe. Why would he have not returned there sooner, then?" Asked Harry.

"Dunno." Tonks said. "Maybe Dumbledore did something to it."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Dumbledore's pretty crafty when he wants to be." Harry said. "Maybe they've hidden it away or something."

"Could be. Might be why mum couldn't recall where it was." Tonks said.

"Fidellus maybe?"

"Probably."

Harry nodded slowly. "Hope it works better for our lot this time than it did the last..."

"No thinking of depressing things, Harry." Tonks said, nudging him lightly.

"Oh, I wasn't." Harry said, smiling aside at the girl. "Just saying. Wormtail was a traitor. Moody was a traitor. Who's to say something bad isn't going to happen again?"

"I guess there'll always be calculated risks." Tonks said. "Especially in a war. You take whoever's willing to fight and hope they don't double cross you in the end."

"I suppose. But I still don't like it." Harry said, letting his head loll back. "...Moody must have been really good at hiding his memories to keep Dumbledore from seeing what he was really upto. ...Wonder if I can learn to be that good."

"At which? Hiding your own memories or prying into others'?"

"Both." Harry said. "Being able to keep my own intentions to myself is top priority, though. I hope Boris and I will have time to sit and practice a bit after we arrive. Knowing Sirius, he may be planning to keep us both busy the rest of the summer."

"Oh man, I hope not. I love Sirius and all, but he doesn't need to do that." Tonks said. "Hopefully Lupin's keeping him under reigns."

Harry chuckled. "Keeping the dog on a leash, as it were?"

"Indeed."

"Well, whatever he's got planned, I'm sure the rest of the summer's going to be better than this bit's been." Harry said.

"Can't see how it'd get much *worse*." Tonks murmured.

"I'm just glad I'm forcing myself to stay away from the Prophet." Harry said. "Not that I think they're telling the truth anyway. Fudge is such a bumbling idiot, he's probably gonna ignore all the signs and pretend it isn't happening."

"Probably. Think he'll get sacked?" Asked Tonks.

"If there's any justice in the world."

"Meaning you don't think there's a chance in hell it'll happen."

"Sadly." Harry muttered. "But what can you do? If the Minister wants to deceive the public, it's his business. Let it be on *his* head if people die. I certainly can't do anything about it. He's the one with the trained force of Aurors."

"Does this mean you're not going to take every death personally?"

"No reason to." Harry said. "I'm not exactly happy with what happened, but blaming myself won't do anyone any good. I have to be stronger than that. Because, for *whatever reason*, people seem to look at me and see some kind of hero figure. Trouble is I'm *not* a hero."

I'm just really lucky when I need to be and horribly *unlucky* the rest of the time."

"I hope everyone we know is safe." Tonks said, her voice suddenly quiet.

"I hope so too." Harry said, slipping an arm around Tonks' shoulders and giving her a one-armed hug.

"I just keep wondering how many empty spots at the House tables there are going to be." Tonks said. "Very depressing."

"Weren't you telling *me* not to think depressing thoughts not too long ago?" Harry asked.

"Shush. This is different." Tonks said.

"I know, I know. But the point holds. Being sad and worrying won't get us anywhere. We need to get stronger. I have a feeling the training room in the Pit's going to get a lot of use this year." Harry said.

"Mm."

"So what do you want to do while we wait for your mum and Dumbledore?" Asked Harry.

"Read?"

"Read? Really?"

"I *am* in Ravenclaw, y'know." Tonks said, lower lip jutting out slightly.

"Yes, yes. You're queen of literature." Harry said.

"Oh, shut up!" Tonks whined, getting to her feet and heading towards a bookcase. "Want me to just grab you any old thing?"

"Sure, I'm not picky." Harry said.

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Andromeda was home within the hour. Dumbledore arrived nearly forty-five minutes after that. He looked as pleasant as he ever did, though Harry could tell something was bothering the man. What it was, he would probably never know. He was certain he'd never be able to spy on the headmaster's mind. And, of course, Dumbledore would never come out and tell him. But Harry knew something was bothering him nonetheless. And whenever Dumbledore was worried about something, it was *worth* worrying about.

Despite this, Harry didn't say anything about it, instead heading up to his room to round his stuff up. Tonks did likewise. The adults walked up the stairs at a more reasonable pace, talking quietly enough that Harry couldn't hear them.

"Uh, Professor?" Asked Harry, stepping out into the hall. "Will I be able to just set my owl free? Will she be able to find Sirius' house alright?"

"She should, yes." Dumbledore said. "And, if she cannot, she is always welcome to wait for you at Hogwarts."

Harry nodded, heading back into his room to let Hedwig free. "Hear that? I'm not entirely sure where we're going, but if you can't hunt me down for some reason, just head on to the school, alright?"

Hedwig hooted indignantly, as if saying she would never be unable to track Harry down. He chuckled and opened the window, letting her go. He watched as she flew off for a moment before turning and getting the rest of his things packed.

"It's time to leave, I take it." Hissed Boris.

"Yup. Here, hop on." Harry said, stepping over to the dresser and extending his right arm. Boris lazily crawled onto it, curling up somewhere around Harry's forearm.

"Let me know if you don't feel well after the trip, okay?" Harry said, dragging his trunk into the hall.

"Oh, I'll be plenty vocal about it if it hurts." Boris said.

"*Hopefully it won't.*" Harry hissed back.

"*Hopefully.*"

Tonks was slightly longer in collecting her things, mostly because they were strewn about her room. Harry stood in the doorway, watching in amusement, as Dumbledore shrunk his trunk down. Once the girl was finished, the headmaster shrunk her trunk as well.

"So, we're going to be apparating?" Harry asked.

"Yes indeed. I think it will be the simplest method of travel. We do not want to gather unwanted attention to ourselves." Said Dumbledore.

"Aww, and here I was hoping we'd get to fly there." Tonks said, pouting.

"Oh come on. Who in their right mind would think that's the best way to get to... wherever we're going?" Harry asked.

"Well! I didn't say it'd be the best. Just the most fun." Tonks said.

"Fun, maybe. Cold, *definitely*." Harry said. "We'd have to fly up pretty high to avoid being seen by the Muggles. Trust me - the higher you get, the colder you get. This way's much simpler."

"Yeah, yeah." Tonks mumbled.

Pocketing their trunks, the teens headed back downstairs. Harry glanced over his shoulder at Dumbledore. "Sir? Boris is on my arm. Apparating won't affect him, will it?"

"Well, I cannot say for certain, as I have never apparated with a snake of any sort. But there is no reason to believe he will be in any danger." Said Dumbledore, smiling. "Now then, are we all set? Andromeda?"

"I can come back and get my things later." Andromeda said, waving a dismissing hand. "So, are you going to tell me why I can't seem to remember my cousin's house?"

Dumbledore's smile widened. "Ah, I was wondering if you would ask. We have warded Sirius' house up quite well since he returned to it."

"Fidellus?" Asked Harry.

"Very good." Dumbledore said, nodding to Harry. "Sadly, as we are out of school, I can award no points. But yes, Harry, the Fidellus Charm was used to hide the house. And I volunteered myself to be the secret keeper."

"Cool. So, how do the rest of us learn of Sirius' house?" Asked Harry.

Dumbledore just chuckled. "I will show you once we arrive. Andromeda, as your house is not yet warded, I believe we can apparate from your living room if that is alright."

"'Not yet' warded?" Tonks questioned.

"Here is just fine, Albus." Said Andromeda.

"Is our house going to be warded too, then?" Asked Tonks.

"Yes, Nymmy." Andromeda said. "We'll talk about it later, if you want."

"I wouldn't mind hearing about it, either." Harry said. "I'd like to know how the house will be protected."

"All in due time. Now let's get going, or you'll never get settled in before bedtime." Andromeda said, stepping next to Tonks.

"So how, exactly, is this going to work?" Asked Harry, walking towards Dumbledore.

"It's quite simple, really. Just take hold of a bit of my robes and leave the rest to me." Said Dumbledore. "Andromeda, are you sure you'll be alright with your daughter?"

"Of course. I've side-alonged grown wizards before, Albus. Nymmy shouldn't be any trouble." Andromeda replied.

"The day Nymmy isn't 'any trouble' is the day I become a squib." Harry dryly commented.

Tonks stuck her tongue out at him.

Chuckling quietly, Dumbledore held his right arm towards Harry, who took hold of a bit of the man's robes. Clutching tightly, just in case the ride was anything like travel by portkey, Harry took a deep breath. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to magical travel..."

"You will learn in time." Said Dumbledore. "Now then, are you ready?"

"...As ready as I'll ever be, I think. Let's get it over with." Harry said. "Boris, you good to go?"

"*All set.*" Hissed the snake.

"Boris is ready too." Harry said.

"Andromeda, if you'll kindly apparate to the place we discussed the other day..." Dumbledore said, glancing up at the woman.

"It's weird. I can remember the street but not the house." Andromeda said, shaking her head. "My memory feels like swiss cheese and I'll be happy to fill in the holes again."

Dumbledore smiled, put a hand on Harry's back, and they were off. Whatever Harry had been thinking might happen, this wasn't it. He had heard descriptions of apparation before, of course, but reading about it and actually experiencing it were two very different things. He was quite sure his organs were being turned to mush from the compression. His eyes didn't feel too great, either, as though they would pop out at any moment. But, thankfully, the trip was very short.

Harry was slightly wobbly when they arrived, but didn't fall over. He did have to clutch at Dumbledore's robes a bit tighter, however.

"Whoo... that was... that was something." Harry said, shaking his head as if to clear the cobwebs.

"It does take a bit of getting used to, yes." Dumbledore agreed. "But the more you practice, the less you feel it. Eventually, you don't notice it at all."

"Hey Boris? You doin' okay?"

"A bit nauseated, but otherwise fine. It is, I feel, a good thing I haven't eaten in a little while..." Boris replied.

A moment later and a **CRACK** filled the air as Andromeda and Tonks popped in to their right. Andromeda had to turn and grab at her daughter to keep her from keeling over backwards.

"You okay?" Asked Harry.

"That was *AWFUL*." Tonks cried, holding her head. "I never want to do *that* again..."

"Hopefully we won't have to worry about it for awhile." Harry said.

"So, Albus, where are we going?" Asked Andromeda.

Dumbledore started up the sidewalk, motioning for the others to follow him. "Just a bit farther. Ah, before we enter, I do have one warning - when you enter, be very quiet."

"Quiet? What for? Someone sleeping?" Asked Tonks.

"You could say that." Dumbledore said. Harry raised an eyebrow at the slightly annoyed tone of the headmaster's voice.

Suddenly, Dumbledore came to a halt between two of the houses. Turning, he pulled a slip of paper from inside his robes. "Read this and memorize what is on it before passing it along." He said, handing the paper out to Andromeda.

"...Oh yeah." Andromeda said slowly after glancing over the paper. "Well, glad to have that memory back."

Harry's brow creased. He waited for Tonks to read the paper before glancing over it himself. It wasn't very long - just a single sentence. Harry glanced up to ask the headmaster a question, but paused when he noticed that Dumbledore was now standing in front of a house that simply hadn't been there before.

"...Yeah, okay, that was weird." Harry said, holding the paper out for Dumbledore to take back.

"Let us get inside quickly." Dumbledore said. "And remember - remain as quiet as you can."

The four walked up to the front door and Dumbledore opened it, stepping back so the rest could enter before him. Harry was last in line and had to step around the Tonks women to really get a good look at the area he had entered. It looked... old. Very old, in fact. The lights didn't seem to work right yet - even the magical ones were acting up - and the whole place seemed to be covered in a very thick layer of dust.

"Glad I don't have allergies." Harry whispered.

"Ditto." Tonks agreed.

Closing the door gently behind him, Dumbledore waved for the group to follow him again, which they did. He led them down a short hallway and into a large, open room. The living room, Harry guessed, judging by how it was decorated. There were a few people sitting around it, talking quietly. Harry only recognized a few of them.

Sirius, who had been standing towards the back of the room, quickly moved towards them as they entered. "Managed to get here in one piece, huh?"

"Indeed we have." Said Dumbledore. "Sirius, would you mind terribly if you gave them the once-around? I have a bit more business to attend to tonight."

"Of course. Thanks for delivering them for me." Sirius said, nodding at Dumbledore, who smiled and swept from the room like a ghost.

"Hey." Harry said, grinning at his godfather.

"Hey yourself. Been holding up alright?" Sirius asked.

"About as well as expected, considering." Harry said.

"Yeah. We've heard. Shame about your cousin." Sirius said, though his tone clearly didn't match what he was saying. Harry just nodded, smirking back at him.

"Been awhile since we've had a chance to talk." Andromeda said.

"Indeed it has. Got all the time in the world here, though." Sirius replied.

"So why do we have to stay quiet?" Asked Tonks.

"Because the bitch in the hall won't keep her fat gob quiet if she hears anything." Sirius growled softly.

"Sirius." Came an admonishing voice from behind them. Looking over his shoulder, Harry saw Remus Lupin walk into the room. "You shouldn't talk about her like that."

"Oh come on, Moony. I'm just being truthful." Sirius said, scowling at his friend.

"I'm still confused." Tonks grumbled.

"He refers to a portrait of his mother." Lupin explained. "We've tried everything to remove it from the wall. Never been successful, though. Guarded by a curtain that flies open any time she hears people. She's... very vocal."

"You mean she pitches a fit and curses at everyone." Sirius corrected.

"...Yes, fine. She does." Lupin said. "Anyway, when you're around the stairs to the second floor, just tiptoe, alright? She has to rant herself out, at which point the curtains will draw closed on their own and she 'rests' again."

"Lovely." Harry said. "Hello, Moony. Keeping Sirius in line?"

"Oi..." Sirius said, looking at his godson.

"As best as any one man can." Lupin replied.

"Oi!" Sirius said, louder this time as he turned to glare at Lupin.

"Sirius, would you like to show the kids up to their rooms? I can lead Andromeda to the kitchen if she'd like something to drink." Lupin said.

"Sure. Andi, I'll be in before long, alright?" Sirius said, putting his hands on Harry and Tonks' shoulders.

"I'll come up before I leave, okay?" Andromeda said, looking at the teens, who nodded in response.

"Good. Let's get going then. I'll show you where you need to keep most quiet at as we go, alright?" Sirius said.

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The short trip upstairs had been... interesting, to say the least. They had passed by Mrs. Black's portrait as quickly as they could. Unfortunately, Tonks tripped and let out a loud "**Ouch!**" when she landed. She had tripped over what Harry originally thought was some sort of hideous trash bin. It was, in fact, a house elf. The oldest house elf Harry had ever come in contact with. It stood hunched over and wringing its hands, its beady, uneven eyes scanning the three as it mumbled darkly under its breath.

Of course, the noise had awakened Mrs. Black's portrait. They hadn't lied - the woman had a set of lungs on her, even in portrait form. She swore at Harry, Tonks, and even Sirius, calling them all sorts of foul things. She cried indignantly about her house being befouled by blood traitors and mudbloods. Sirius gave the shambling house elf a running kick in the bottom before wheeling Harry and Tonks up the stairs.

"There's *nothing* that can be done about that thing?!" Harry asked as they reached the second floor. "What was with the house elf?"

"That was Kreacher." Sirius snarled, aiming the teens down towards the far end of the hall. "Unfortunately, he seems to have a knack for staying alive. He's also disobedient, a lying little thief, and the biggest pain in the arse ever to step foot in this house. Next to our dear friend Snivellus, of course."

"Snape visits? Well that's just great." Harry grumbled.

"Yeah, I'm not too thrilled with it either. Anyway, here's your room, you two." Sirius said, opening the door.

"Our room? So we're not gonna get holed up in separate ones?" Asked Tonks.

"You two would end up together one way or another." Sirius said, finally smiling again. "I figure it's best to just cut out the middleman. I trust the two of you. You're going to be married someday, after all."

"The man speaks the truth." Harry said. "Thanks, Sirius."

"No problem, kiddo. Now then - get your things out. I assume Albus shrunk your trunks?"

"Yup." Harry said, pulling his from his pocket. Next to him, Tonks did likewise.

"Set them down somewhere and I'll get them fixed up for you, alright?" Sirius said, pulling his wand. The teens did as he said and, in a few seconds, their trunks were full size once more and sitting side-by-side at the foot of the large bed.

Tonks walked over and sat on the edge, bouncing slightly. "Ooh, it's soft..."

"Used to be mine. I wasn't going to sleep on a rock." Sirius said, grinning. "Got a room one floor up next to Moony's now. Figured you two could do with a bit better than the others. ...Well, that and I just don't want to be in here myself."

"Bad childhood?" Harry asked.

"You have no idea." Sirius said. "If you want, I can tell you about it. Not got anything better to do at the moment. And I assume you two have already eaten dinner."

Tonks nodded. "Mind if I go check out the bathroom before you start?"

"Feel free." Sirius said.

Tonks hopped down from the bed and scampered across the room, opening the door to the attached bathroom. "...Not quite as good as the one in the Pit, but *very* nice nonetheless." She said, looking around from the doorway. "...Weren't you teasing Lupin about lavish things?"

"I had no say in the design or decoration." Sirius said. "I've got a nice little twin bed upstairs and it's all I could hope for. My old bed should be more than enough room for you two to stretch out, though. ...Oh. Speaking of. I think I should warn you..."

"Warn us?" Harry repeated. "Of?"

"Molly." Sirius said, a sour look on his face.

"Molly? ...Not Molly *Weas/ey*." Harry said.

"The very same." Sirius said. "She and her lot have been moved over here for the summer, along with a couple of your other friends, I think. The kids have been fine - the twins and I get on famously, in fact. But that woman is going to drive me back to madness one of these days."

"What's she doing?" Asked Tonks, walking back over to the bed.

Running a hand back through his hair, Sirius sighed. "What *isn't* she doing? The minute she stepped foot in here, she damn near took the place over. She cooks all the meals, she cleans here and there between those, and she bickers at me about the state the house has fallen into! There's nothing I can do about it, of course, but it's annoying as hell. Moony's the only thing keeping me from having an all-out battle with the old gorgon."

Harry snorted. "Yeah, I've met her before. She definitely seems the type to be overbearing."

"It wouldn't bother me so much if she wasn't acting like the place belonged to her and I was some servant who failed to do his duties." Sirius said. "What Arthur saw in that woman is beyond me."

"Let us have a moment of silence for poor Mr. Weasley." Tonks said, putting her hands together and bowing her head.

Harry snorted.

"I don't suppose you'd mind telling us your story after we collect our friends, would you?" Asked Tonks, looking up at Sirius as she leaned back.

"I don't suppose so, no. There's not a whole lot to tell. Everyone around your age is up here on the second floor. Tell you what, you two get settled in a bit and I'll go round them up." Sirius said.

"Sounds like a plan. Good luck avoiding your mother and the Weasleys!" Harry said, grinning as Sirius headed for the door.

"I got stuck between them one day. Worst headache of my life!" Sirius laughed.

Harry flopped back on the bed as Sirius left the room, closing the door behind him. "Well, Nymmy... we're here. ...I wonder if this is where I would've lived if Wormtail hadn't gotten away..."

"You sure you would've wanted that?" Asked Tonks.

"I think so. Sirius' mother isn't much louder than any of the Dursleys. And I think I could deal with Mrs. Weasley. This room is great, though. Nice and open, good bed..."

"We should get some candles going on the dressers and nightstands." Tonks said, looking around. "It'd make it look really nice at night."

"I cannot wait to sleep." Harry said. "It has been an absolutely exhausting summer."

"And we've got a ways to go before returning to Hogwarts." Tonks said. "...So Sirius warned us about Mrs. Weasley. Wonder what for."

"No idea." Harry said. "Probably thought she'd try barging in at all hours to clean or something."

"Probably. Maybe we could ask the twins to trap the door or something."

"Now there's a thought." Harry said. "Hopefully we can catch them after Sirius' story and before we go to bed."

"Hopefully."

Harry turned his head. "...I hear footsteps."

"Lots of footsteps."

Harry sat up, stretching and groaning. "Got a ways to go before the day's over. Gotta at least try and be good hosts."

"But we're not the hosts. We're guests here too!" Tonks said.

"True, but this is *our* room now." Harry said.

"I guess. I think I'll be ready to curl up and drift off too when the time comes. Dinner's finally settling back down after that stupid apparation trip and it's telling me it wants me to sleep while it digests." Tonks said, patting her stomach.

"...You know what would be funny?" Harry suddenly said.

"What?"

"Changing our appearances to look like Malfoy and Parkinson." Harry said.

"Ooh. That would be *mean*."

"Think of their expressions, though." Harry said.

"Yeah, but have you practiced enough to do something like that?"

"...I think so. And look at it this way - if I haven't, it's going to be even funnier." Harry said.

Tonks snorted. "Well, that's good enough for me. C'mon, we've gotta be quick about this. They'll be here any time."

A minute later and the door to the room opened once more. Sirius stepped in, a chain of people behind him. "Well, I think I've gotten everyone, Harry, but--"

Sirius came to a dead halt as he stared at the people across the room. One had short, dark hair that slightly obscured one of her eyes. The other... well, it almost looked as if that one had gotten into a fight with a campfire and the fire had won.

Hermione was the first to enter. She simply stared at Harry and Tonks with her mouth open. Ginny was next in. She did the same, but quickly had to hide a grin. Ron was peering around Sirius, trying to get a good look. Solieyu and the twins were near the back and were simply wondering what the holdup was.

As the two groups stared at one another, Fred and George pushed their way to the front. As soon as they caught sight of the two, they immediately started laughing. And, as much as he tried not to, Harry eventually joined in, his face returning to normal.

"You two are horrible!" Harry cried, grabbing a pillow and flinging it at the twins. "I was trying to get a scream out of someone!"

"Mate, the only way you could've done that is if Draco Malfoy himself had walked in and seen you. ...And now that I've said that, you're going to have to do that as soon as school starts or I'll never get the idea out of my head." Said Fred, wiping his eyes.

"Bets on if Malfoy wets himself?" George added.

"Two galleons says he does." Came Ron's voice from somewhere in the back.

"Oh lord. You people are off to an early start." Came Solieyu's voice as he moved through the crowd. "Hello, you two."

"Leon." Harry said. "Good to know you got somewhere safe."

"Yes, I thought so. It's... been an odd time here, though." Said the vampire as he walked over.

"Speaking of odd times, Sirius has agreed to tell us of his childhood!" Tonks said. "So find somewhere to sit and let's hear what he has to say."

"The Sirius Black Nighttime Story Hour! How could we pass up such a chance?" Asked George.

"...I should've collected Moony. I have a feeling I'm going to chase at least one of you out of the room before this is over." Sirius said, shaking his head and sitting on the opposite side of the bed that Harry and Tonks were sitting on. "Right. Like they said - sit down. This may take awhile."

Chapter 5 – Mysteries Revealed

The platform was crowded with people. Parents wishing their children a good year, friends meeting up, and lots of goodbyes being said. But not every child there had been brought by their parents. And not every child was looking forward to leaving. One in particular stood, by himself, leaning against a pillar. He was watching the proceedings through half-lidded grey eyes, wishing that something - anything - would happen to liven things up.

But, much to the boy's annoyance, nothing exciting took place. He boarded the train and skulked down the long corridor, slipping by other, older children unnoticed. He glanced aside at each compartment as he passed and, when he finally found one that was empty, he entered. Throwing himself uncaringly onto one of the seats, he turned his gaze out the window. He didn't want to be there. He wanted to be anywhere but on the train to Hogwarts. But his parents had forced him to go, telling him that if he didn't get into Slytherin House, he may as well not return.

The boy narrowed his eyes at the memory of his parents. All of them had been in Slytherin during their Hogwarts years. Well, all of them who still remained a part of the family, anyway. He hated his parents with a deep, burning passion. They were very strict and, as part of high society, proclaimed that anything less than perfection was not to be tolerated.

He had lost weight that summer, mostly due to his parents practically starving him. All he had done was cause his little brother to get lost in the family's hedge maze. So what? But they hadn't seen it as brothers being brothers. They had given him a good, long yelling at and had locked him in his room. What little food he did receive consisted mostly of scraps that the rest of the family had left over after meals. A house elf would come up once a day with a meager plate of such things. Or, at least, they *had* until he had started to assault them and demand to be let out and fed properly. After that, the food stopped coming and he had had to work out how to get some on his own.

It wasn't so much that he hated rocking the gaunt, skinny kid look. It meant people would naturally avoid him. He wanted that. Rather, it was the way his parents acted that made him so angry. He didn't know who the hell they thought they were fooling. Oh, they swore up and down that they didn't support He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, but they were still friends with many who did. The Malfoy family in particular held close ties to them. He hated them even more than his own parents, though. They were just so damned... so damned...

Well, he wasn't quite sure what they were 'so damned,' as he had never been much for words. But he knew they were so uptight they'd snap in a stiff wind. Even his own parents didn't lie and double-talk as much as the Malfoys did.

Oh, he would be the perfect gentlemen in the company of his elders, so long as those elders weren't his own. And, to the outside world, it appeared as if Sirius Black were being raised in the footsteps of his parents, holding pure blood high and turning up noses at the lower classes.

Pfft. Screw that.

Sirius would carve his *own* path through the world, whatever course it had set for itself. He crossed his arms and stared out as more children flooded onto the platform. How anyone could be so sickeningly sweet with their families baffled him to no end. It was truly disgusting how some of them would cling to their mothers and fathers, crying that they didn't *want* to go.

"Idiots. Should just stay home if you're going to be babies about it." He muttered darkly to himself. "The less crybabies at the school, the better."

Just then, the compartment door slip open and another boy, looking to be slightly shorter than he was, stepped in.

"Is anyone else sitting in here?"

Sirius shrugged.

"Right. Mind if I stay, then? Been up and down this whole compartment at least three times and I just can't find a good place." Said the boy.

Sirius shrugged again.

"...Not the talkative type, are you? Well, would you at least tell me your name?"

"Asking for others' names without stating your own first?" Asked Sirius, his voice gruff.

"Oh, right! Manners and such. Name's James. James Potter. I'd say it was nice to meet you, but you seem to be in a bit of a mood at the moment!"

Sirius' left eye began to twitch slightly. "A mood."

"Well *something's* obviously bothering you." Said James, cocking an eyebrow. "You were all staring moodily out the window when I came in. Kind of why I didn't bother checking here until now. That look could cause a lion to back up."

"You're not going to shut up until I start talking more, are you?" Asked Sirius.

"Probably not!" Chirped James, grinning. "Now then - you still haven't told me *your* name."

"Sirius Black."

"That wasn't so hard then, was it?"

"What the devil are you so energetic about?" Sirius asked.

"Are you kidding? We're going to *Hogwarts*, man! We're finally going to learn magic! Doesn't that, y'know, get you excited?" Asked James, his eyes shining brightly.

"I've grown up seeing magic on a daily basis. Who cares?"

"Well so've I, but still! We'll finally get to use it ourselves now!"

"First thing I'm doing is finding a good silencing spell." Sirius growled, turning to stare back out the window. "...God, he's *still* out there."

"Huh? Who is?" Asked James, scooting across the seat and peering out the window as well.

"Some tiny kid. Won't stop clinging to his mother. Surely he's not old enough to be starting school already." Sirius said. "...Pathetic."

"Nothin' wrong with being scared. He's probably leaving home for the first time. Judging by how he's actin', I bet he hasn't been away from home for more than a week." James said.

"He'll get eaten alive in the real world unless he learns to grow up quickly." Sirius said, leaning back and closing his eyes.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad out there, huh?" James said, glancing over at Sirius. "Can you believe people actually believe that psycho's claims?"

"Psycho?"

"Voldemort." James said, grinning when Sirius nearly toppled over. "Oh come on, you're scared of his name? Weren't you just insulting some other kid for being scared?"

"Being scared of leaving home and being scared of the most dangerous man on the planet are two *VERY* different things!" Sirius snarled. "And don't say his damn name!"

"It's just a name. If you're scared of a *name*, you have no right picking on anyone else, you big woman." James said, smirking.

"Take that back, Potter." Sirius said, getting to his feet.

"Or you'll do what?" Asked James, also standing up.

Sirius just grinned.

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"Wait wait wait." Harry said, interrupting Sirius. "So let me get this straight. Your parents good as supported Voldemort the first time around, yeah?"

"Mmhmm." Replied Sirius, nodding.

"And you were in a bad mood because you had been a smartass in front of them so they all but starved you right before you were set to go to Hogwarts?"

"That's more or less what I said, yes."

"And then you saw some kid crying--"

"Not some kid. That was Wormtail." Sirius said, his voice taking a hard edge. "Didn't like him from the start."

"Crap. Okay, so that was Wormtail acting like Wormtail even as a kid. You and my dad got into a fight on the train the day you first met?!"

"Pretty much." Sirius said, grinning. "I won, too. James was quick, but I had more power. I was used to getting into fights with Regulus, you see."

"Your little brother?" Asked Tonks.

"Yup." Sirius said. "Jackass got killed by Voldemort himself. Still not sure why."

"Damn. How old was he?" Asked Harry.

"Eighteen." Sirius said. "I've scoured the library downstairs for anything that might mention what the hell happened, exactly, but so far I've hit nothing. And, of course, the rest of my family is dead, so I don't have anyone to turn to to ask. Bit of a mystery, really."

"Well why didn't you know?" Solieyu asked. "Weren't you around when it happened or had he already moved away from home?"

"No clue." Sirius said. "I cut the ties to my family when I was sixteen. Went to live with James and his parents."

"What? Really? What made you do that?" Harry asked.

"Getting sick of my parents being gigantic tits, mostly." Sirius said in a dry voice. "I was tired of listening to them praising Voldemort and the Death Eaters. Every damn morning, the bitch would talk to dad about how wonderful it was that mudbloods and Muggles were being murdered. Dad usually just did the same thing I did - ignore her. But, as you've heard by now, it was a bit hard to ignore her when she wanted to be heard."

"Indeed." Harry said. "So that was how you met dad. I assume Wormtail ended up in your compartment?"

"Yeah. James welcomed him in. Both of us were all bloody from the fight and looked hideous, so it took him a bit of coaxing. Shame, that." Sirius said.

"No Moony? When did you guys start hanging out with him?" Harry asked.

"Oh, we met him that year since we were all sorted into Gryffindor. But he was a loner and very quiet. Liked to shy away from large groups. James was always boisterous and tended to gather a lot of attention. Come to think of it, so did I. Completely different reasons, though. After a few years, my hair was down to my waist and I was gaining a reputation around the school. Must've had fifty girlfriends by the time I graduated..."

"No offense, Sirius, but I can't imagine you being a huge lady's man like that." Harry said, grinning crookedly.

"Lady's man nothing. They weren't serious relationships." Sirius said, smirking in reply. "Anyway, we really got to know Moony towards the end of our second year after that whole thing with the Stolas."

"The Stolas?" Repeated Hermione. "But wait, what was..."

"No clue. Someone had let it into the school and it kept attacking people. Was completely ridiculous. So the four of us banded together... actually, three of us did. The rat stayed behind James, cowering as per usual. Anyway, we hunted it down and found it had

made a nest down in one of the deeper levels of the dungeons. We nearly got killed by the damn thing, though. We didn't know it had a nest until it started to defend it. All four of us had to use stunners to slow it down enough just to escape. We told every teacher we ran across on our way back to Gryffindor Tower. None of us wanted to stop longer than that. Week later, the headmaster at the time called us into his office and told us they had moved the Stolas and its unhatched babies off somewhere safe." Sirius explained.

"Wow. So crazy stuff was happening at Hogwarts before I got there. That's refreshing to hear." Harry said.

"Back to the point - I left my parents, got a motorcycle just to piss them off even more, and went to stay with James for awhile. We were flatmates for a few years before I got sick of hearing him and Lily going at it." Sirius said.

"Dammit, Sirius! There are certain things I don't need to hear!" Harry cried, making a face. "Far too much information!"

"Yes, I thought so too." Sirius said, biting back a grin. "Anyway, I suppose that wasn't exactly the story I meant to tell when I gathered you lot, but..."

"Was better than nothing." Harry said. "And it's the best entertainment I've had so far this summer."

"Yeah." Sirius said, looking at Harry strangely. "Albus told us you'd gotten a warning about the dementors' arrival. Wouldn't say who, though."

"He won't tell *me* who sent it." Tonks said. "I think he's set on keeping a secret between himself, Dumbledore, and whoever wrote it."

"Well, whoever it is definitely earned a thanks from me." Sirius said. "You may as well be a Marauder yourself, Harry, for all the trouble you seem to get into."

"All the trouble that seems to hunt me down, you mean." Harry said.

"Whichever. Point is, you're damn lucky."

"Unlucky. The Marauders' luck doesn't seem to be that great, Sirius. No offense."

Sirius chuckled. "Yeah. James is dead, Wormtail's as good as, I was locked away for something I didn't do, and Moony couldn't hold a job if his life depended on it."

"I'll thank you to keep me out of whatever you're talking about." Came a dry voice from the doorway.

Sirius smirked as he stood. "Hey, I'm being a perfect gentleman with this lot. I've just been explaining how I met you and James. And why I got the hell out of *this* place when I got the chance."

"You? A perfect gentleman?" Lupin repeated, crossing his arms.

Sirius' smirk grew as he crossed the room. "I didn't tell them about that game of spin th--"

"**YES**, very good. Sirius, you're wanted downstairs!" Lupin said, his voice cracking slightly.

"Oh no. I caught what he was gonna say!" Said Tonks, hopping up from the edge of the bed. "Spin the bottle? When? What happened?"

"He'll tell you when you're older." Lupin said, grabbing Sirius by the ear and leading him (protesting all the way) out into the hall and off downstairs.

"...I'm not sure I want to know." Fred said after awhile, finally breaking the silence.

"Speak for yourself." Said Ginny.

"Oh, yuck." George said, staring at his little sister. "Look, Gin, what you think about is your business, but..."

"Whaaat? C'mon, it's clear Lupin had to kiss someone embarrassing! And with the way Sirius was smirking..."

"I don't need to think about Sirius and Lupin snogging in a closet! They could be our dads, for Merlin's sake. There's got to be an age limit on fantasizing about things." Fred cried.

"Yeah, but if it happened at Hogwarts..." Ginny continued. "You've seen some of Lupin's old school pictures! He and Sirius were both... both..."

"Gorgeous." Supplied Hermione, causing everyone to stare at her. "...What? They were."

"So let's recap the summer, kids." Harry said. "I was nearly attacked by dementors. Mrs. Weasley has been driving Sirius batty. And Ginny and Hermione have crushes on Sirius and Moony's teenaged selves."

"I... I do not!" Hermione sputtered, turning an interesting shade of crimson.

"Guilty!" Ginny exclaimed, giggling at the shocked look Hermione fixed her with. "Come on, Hermione, are you telling me you would've avoided kissing them?!"

"I... I was... I don't..." Hermione stammered. "Oh, go to bed!"

"If I have to go to bed, you have to go to bed." Ginny said, smirking.

"Do I have to listen to you muttering to yourself about Sirius and Lupin in your sleep?" Asked Hermione.

"Only if my brain lets me take that path as I dream." Ginny cooed.

Hermione let out a long-suffering sigh. "Maybe I should sleep down in the library tonight."

"Not unless you want mum dusting you at six in the morning." George said.

"Or throwing you out with the Dark Arts books she finds." Fred added.

Solieyu glanced over at Harry who, while looking highly amused, also had a very tired expression on his face. Clearing his throat, he finally

stood up. "Okay, you lot. Let's let the new arrivals wash up and get some sleep, shall we? They've had a more exhausting summer than the rest of us. I'm sure staying up so long listening to Sirius talk hasn't helped."

"You don't have to." Harry said. "I'm good for at least another hour."

"After which you'll promptly collapse." Solieyu said. "You're getting some sleep, Harry."

"Yes, mum." Harry replied, rolling his eyes. "I'll see you guys at breakfast tomorrow then, yeah?"

"Not the twins. Mrs. Weasley has to come and fetch them after everyone else has been seated. It's a daily routine at this point." Solieyu explained.

"We've been busy." Fred said, crossing his arms. "Gotta make preparations for our joke shop and all, you know."

"Not easy keeping our research hidden from mum. Sirius has graciously shown us a few hiding spots for things that he found as a kid. So far, mum hasn't caught on." George added. "We figure we can keep it from her the rest of the summer if all goes well!"

"And when you reach Hogwarts, it'll go into the Pit?" Asked Harry.

"Yup!" Fred said. "Anyway, Leon's right. We'll let you lovebirds get your beauty sleep. Harry in particular seems to be in dire need."

"I'm not even going to respond to that." Harry said. "Leon, escort this completely barmy circus from my quarters!"

"Aye aye, sir!" Leon said, saluting Harry and Tonks before chasing everyone else from the room.

"That was easy." Tonks murmured, flopping back down on the bed.

"Being chased by a vampire - that's not something that happens to just anyone over their summer holiday." Harry said.

"Let's just hope it stays that way." Solieyu said, leaning against the door frame.

"Managed to get everyone back to their rooms without awakening the banshee in the portrait, I see." Said Harry.

"Indeed. We've gotten used to the madness of this place. Dumbledore collected mother and I the day after I returned home. Hearing Sirius' mother scream at me once was enough." Solieyu said. "We'll talk more in the morning, though. I'm glad that you both made it out of there unharmed."

"So am I." Harry said. "I'm gonna have some business to attend to once we get back to school, though. A few things, actually. ...Is the chaos next year going to start on the train ride *home* from Hogwarts? Seems it's getting earlier and earlier. Like Christmas, strangely enough."

"Don't even joke." Solieyu said. "I'm going to head for my own room now. Tonks, make sure he gets some sleep."

"Will do, Lieutenant Reinhardt!" Tonks said, saluting.

Solieyu snorted, closing the door behind him as he left.

"...Okay, can I have one day where nothing happens this summer?" Harry groaned, laying back and closing his eyes.

"We can always lock ourselves up in the library." Tonks suggested. "You need in the bathroom? I want to get a bath before sleeping."

"Nah, I'm fine. I may go down to the library and find something to read, though." Harry said, pushing himself back up.

"Don't take too long." Tonks said, grinning as she rummaged through her trunk.

"This from the woman who spends an hour in the bathtub." Harry mumbled, quickly side-stepping a wadded-up shirt as he ran for the door.

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When Tonks emerged from the bathroom almost an hour later, it was to find Harry sitting up in bed, reading. He had collected a small pile of books that were stacked on the table next to his side of the bed. He was also lacking the top to his pajamas.

"Hello then." Tonks said, toweling her hair. "Not sleeping with a shirt on?"

"Don't see a reason why I should." Harry said. "Can't wear pajamas forever, after all. I figure this is at least a good start."

"True. And it's very pleasant on the eyes!" Tonks said, giggling. "Still a bit scrawny for my likes, though. Shame Quidditch isn't a sport you gain a lot of muscles from playing."

"Oi oi... are you saying you'd want some big, beefy weightlifter as a boyfriend?" Asked Harry, glancing off to one side as Tonks started to change clothes.

"I didn't say that!" Tonks exclaimed. "I'm just saying, you're still pretty rail thin."

"Gee thanks." Harry muttered.

"Only speaking the truth." Tonks said, sitting on the edge of the bed and sliding her legs under the covers. "Also, I'm following your lead."

"Following my lead?" Asked Harry, glancing over. Then down. "...Oh. Okay, so between us we have an unused set of pajamas."

"I don't want to think about the type of person who could fit into my pajama bottoms and your pajama top." Tonks said, making a face.

"Well, there's always that muscleman chap you were lusting about a moment ago." Harry suggested, earning him a slug to the arm. "Ouch! Okay, I totally deserved that. But you *did* set yourself up."

"So I did." Tonks said, scooting up next to Harry and leaning against him. "Whatcha readin'?"

"Dark Arts stuff. Met up with Sirius en route downstairs and he told me I could nick any books that looked good. Said I might as well, given Molly might snatch them up and toss them out at any given time." Harry said.

"I'm surprised he's letting you take that kinda thing." Tonks said.

"Unlike some people, Sirius isn't paranoid." Harry said.

"I resent that." Hissed Boris from somewhere behind the pile of books.
"It was a genuine concern."

"Be that as it may," Harry replied in Parseltongue. *"I didn't turn Dark. Nor will I."*

"Yes, yes. You've explained that many times now."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Anyway, Sirius was in a pretty bad mood. Apparently the adults decided to have a late dinner. Probably something to do with the Order of the Phoenix. Lupin came into the library while I was looking around. Apparently he likes to sit and read when there's a slow moment or two. Can't say as I blame him. This house is a wreck. Anyway, he told me Sirius and Molly got into some huge row over me. Wouldn't say why, though."

"Wonderful. Just what we need. Some overbearing harpy trying to tell Sirius how to run his life. Bad enough she's taken over his house." Tonks said. "I guess we know where dear Ron gets his charm from now."

"Indeed. So, you ready to settle down and sleep for a hundred hours?" Asked Harry.

"You have no idea." Tonks said, poking Harry's bare chest and grinning.

"Keep your hands to yourself, you scurvy wench." Harry laughed, setting the book he had been reading atop the stack.

"If I'm a wench, what's that make you?" Asked Tonks.

"I'm the captain, of course." Said Harry.

"You're a captain, Leon's a lieutenant, and I'm stuck being the wench? I demand a better paying role in this screwy outfit!" Tonks cried.

"Vice-captain, then?" Suggested Harry, sliding down and groaning as his back started aching.

"Vice-captain will work nicely." Tonks said, sliding down and curling up against Harry. "Oh damn, you're cold!"

"Says the woman with the feet of ice." Harry said, scowling.

"I just got outta the bathtub! And this house isn't much better than the Pit as far as warm floors goes. Not my fault." Tonks said, pouting.

"Right. Something else to do when we get back then - affix warming charms on the floors." Harry said.

"I'd appreciate that as well." Hissed Boris lazily.

Harry yawned, closing his eyes. "I probably shouldn't have read so much. Eyes are burning."

"Ick. Well, no reason to open your eyes again." Tonks said, laying her head on Harry's shoulder. "Wonder what breakfast'll be like."

"Molly will probably be cooking." Harry murmured, arms wrapping around Tonks. "I'm sure *that* will be fun."

"Two knuts that she'll 'accidentally' try pouring coffee on Sirius' lap." Tonks said.

"Two knuts says that if she succeeds, Sirius will duct tape her to the ceiling."

Tonks snickered. "Can duct tape physically hold someone like her up?"

"I dunno. Ask your creepy imaginary muscle-bound dream date." Harry mumbled, yawning again.

"If you weren't about to pass out on me, I'd swat you." Tonks said, tilting her head to kiss Harry on the cheek. "Sleep now."

"Yes ma'am." Harry said, his voice trailing off.

Tonks grinned, snuggling up closer and drifting off moments later.

Chapter 6 – Potter vs. Weasley

Molly Weasley, it could be said, was an excellent mother. She had raised a small army's worth of children and, despite her family's poorness in regards to money, they had all grown up and fit into society as well as she could hope. Her home life was never a very exciting one. And she liked it that way. She had had too many stressful days during the First War against Voldemort. Fred and George would always keep her on her toes, of course, but she knew that they always meant well.

Her peaceful world had been fractured a few years back when she had been called to Hogwarts on emergency. Her daughter had gone missing and some monster - a basilisk, as it turned out - had been terrorizing the school. Of course, no one could confirm anything at the time, but she knew what that kind of thing had to mean.

To her immense relief, Ginny had been rescued from the basilisk, as well as a memory of the Dark Lord himself, by Harry Potter.

Harry was so different than Molly ever expected him to be. She had known Lily and James, of course, and had always pictured the boy to be... well, she wasn't quite sure how she would put it into words. But the youth she saw that day in the hospital of Hogwarts wasn't it. He was painfully skinny, as if he'd never eaten a good meal in his life. She had discussed this with Poppy Pomfrey, who told her that Harry was indeed eating healthily at the school.

And it seemed like the poor boy could never seem to catch a break. And being there to actually bear witness to the Dark Lord being resurrected... it was all too much to handle. She had no idea how Harry had remained as relatively cheerful as he had. Of course, he had spent most of the last year at Hogwarts shuffling about and being depressed, but she could hardly blame him. He had seen a fellow classmate killed in cold blood. And despite Voldemort summoning his Death Eaters, Harry had still been level-headed enough to bring the Diggory boy back with him.

She was pleased to hear that Harry and his friends would be coming to Grimmauld. It would do Sirius good. That man had simply been

moping too much lately. Seeing his godson would do wonders for him. And she knew that Harry would be glad to see Sirius as well, given they had never really had any time to just sit and talk to one another. They had never been given the chance to be a family. And to Molly, family was everything.

She fully planned to treat the boy as well as one of her own, too. Ginny was still alive because of his bravery.

She was hoping to have a one-on-one talk to him this morning, to see how he was holding up. She had been cooking for awhile and, once she had a pair of plates piled high, she set out towards the room Harry was staying in. Knocking once when she arrived, she called out softly, "Harry, dear? I'm coming in!"

Molly opened the door and slipped into the room quickly, closing it behind her. "Good morning, dear. How are y--"

Harry, looking bleary-eyed, was glancing across the room at the redhaired woman with something akin to annoyance on his face. Tonks, who was nestled up against his side, was also glancing at Molly, looking more groggy than irritated.

"Wha's up?" Harry asked, rubbing at his left eye. "Breakfast time? Want me to come help or something?"

"HARRY POTTER!" Roared the woman, turning to deftly place the full tray of food on a dresser by the door. **"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"**

"Well I *was* sleeping." Harry grumbled darkly. "Guess this is our wake-up call, Nymmy."

"Bleh. I wanna sleep in." Tonks whined, tugging the covers back up as Harry slipped out of bed.

"That is *NOT* what I meant! Explain yourself, young man!" Molly cried.

"What's to explain?" Asked Harry. "I was sleeping."

"Sleeping *WITH* someone!"

"Well obviously." Harry replied, shaking his head as he stared at the woman.

Molly sputtered for a moment. "You shouldn't be--"

"Oh, don't you dare." Harry said, the realization of what the Weasley matron was getting at finally entering his groggy head. "We were doing exactly what I *said* we were doing - **SLEEPING!**"

"You expect me to believe that?!" Asked Molly, her pitch shrill.

"Ask anyone in my inner circle." Harry replied, putting a hand on his hip and shifting his weight. "Not like this is a new occurrence or anything. I can't sleep well without Tonks with me."

"Awww..." Came Tonks' voice from beneath the covers.

"You're *far* too young for that sort of thing! You get back to your own bedroom at once, young lady!" Molly said, pointing an accusing finger towards the lump under the covers.

"This *is* her room. And mine." Harry said, glaring openly at Molly Weasley now. "**OUR** room. And don't you *dare* order her around, you bloody **COW!**"

Harry's hand stretched out towards the table his pile of books were sitting on. His wand rattled briefly, then flew to his open hand. His fingers quickly curling around it, he continued, "This is **SIRIUS'** house. **NOT YOURS.** As such, it's as good as my house as well. And I'll be damned if anyone's going to order myself, Tonks, or any of our friends around in it!"

"Oh you think *not*, eh?" Molly replied, eyes wide. "Well let me tell *you* something--"

"No, let me tell **you** something, you old **GORGON!**" Harry spat back. "Perhaps you haven't been privvy to the news - I was there when Voldemort was resurrected! He killed a friend of mine! I've had to deal with him in **SOME** form or another almost every year I've been at Hogwarts! You'd think I'd have been used to it given my relatives put my life in danger plenty of times on their own. But that's the funny

thing about almost getting killed - it never gets easier! The once chance I have to relax and collect my thoughts is over the summer holiday,
and now even THAT was threatened! I should at least be allowed one of the few things that still manages to make me happy in life - being curled up next to the woman I love!"

Harry turned, facing the bed again. "Nymmy, let's get out of here." He said, his tone noticeably softer.

"Do we have to?" Whined Tonks. "Can't you just blast her into the hall and lock the door behind her?"

"I could, yes. But I'd rather avoid a physical confrontation if at all possible. Come on. The library should be mostly vacant. Let's head down there. There's a couch, so you can stretch out and sleep a bit longer on it if you want." Harry said, heading for his trunk and fishing out a clean shirt. He really should have gotten his clothes put into one of the dressers in the room the previous night before going to bed.

"Don't talk about me as though I weren't here." Said Molly, hands on her hips as she watched Harry slip the shirt on, buttoning it halfway up.

"Then don't talk about me as if I were one of your kids." Harry growled, glaring back at Molly.

"You're as good as!" Cried Molly.

"I already have a mother figure in my life." Harry said coldly. "Oi, Nymmy, you coming?"

Tonks groaned, slipping out of bed and scratching at her head. "Nn. If I must. Lemme find some jeans."

Harry waited as Tonks got a pair of jeans from her trunk, tugging them on quickly. Once she was through, she nodded Harry's way and the two started across the room. "Let's get away from her. She's far too rude for my liking. Especially at this hour." She grumbled.

"Agreed." Harry said. The two brushed past Molly and headed into the hall. "I wonder if Hermione is down there already..."

"She must be." Tonks said. "I doubt anyone in the whole house is still asleep after *someone* began screaming like a banshee!"

Harry was in a foul mood. One that certainly wasn't remedied as the two passed by the portrait of Mrs. Black. Of course, she herself had been awakened by the commotion upstairs and wasted no time in screaming at the Ravenclaws. Harry twitched, a headache coming on very quickly. In his unstable state, he had a very weak grasp on his own power and, as the woman started to insult Tonks, it broke free.

Harry let out a surprised yelp and dropped to his knees as a green surge of energy arched from his right hand, flickering across the floor before going up the wall and coming in contact with Mrs. Black herself. The woman let out a horrified shriek as the energy began to tear at the portrait's material.

Tonks wasn't quite sure what to do. She had seen Harry's magic go haywire before and knew it could very easily go chasing after anyone who tried touching him. On the other hand, Harry looked like he was hurting quite a bit, though he was doing little more than letting out strained gasps now that the magic had him on the floor.

The energy surging out split into four separate bolts, each lashing across the portrait over and over until a cracking noise could be heard. The energy then seemed to almost dissipate entirely, causing Harry to let out a relieved sigh.

"You okay?" Tonks asked, her voice small.

"Yeah..." Harry said, groaning as he stood back up. "My head feels like it's on fire, but I'm good. I wa--"

Harry was thrown backwards as one final power surge found a way out of him. Tonks let out a surprised scream and toppled over backwards, missing the giant sphere of energy as it slammed into the wall. Mrs. Black let out one last terrible scream before her portrait (and most of the wall surrounding it) exploded.

Every adult in the area (as well as some of the younger crowd) had gathered at the explosion, arriving just as Harry shakily picked himself up and dusted bits of wall and portrait from his pants.

"...Good show." Sirius said, rubbing his chin as he observed the carnage. "It'll be a lot nicer without the old battleaxe breaking the peace. You alright?"

"Kinda sore." Harry admitted, rubbing his lower back.

"What happened?" Asked Lupin.

"Wild magic went off." Harry said, helping Tonks to her feet. "Sirius' mother started insulting Nymmy. I was already in a mood because *someone* gave us a rude wake-up call. You'd uh... you'd better fix the wall, though. It's making some nasty sounds there..."

"Good point. Go off and get some rest. We'll deal with the wall." Sirius said, motioning towards the library. As Harry and Tonks set off towards it, Tonks helping Harry walk, Sirius looked around at the mostly-motionless crowd. "Well? You heard the man! Help me fix this mess!"

"Unwanted, but it felt good to shut her up." Harry muttered as he and Tonks padded into the library. As it turned out, Hermione wasn't around, which suited the two of them just fine. After grabbing another book on Dark Arts, Harry flopped down on one end of the couch. Tonks waited for him to sit before stretching out along the couch, her head resting on Harry's right leg. Smiling, Harry shifted the book to his left hand, using his right to play with Tonks' hair.

"Not as good as being curled up in bed, but close enough." Purred Tonks, her eyes fluttering shut. "Honestly, who does that woman think she is?"

"Which one?" Asked Harry dryly.

"Both." Tonks growled. "What the hell did she expect, anyway? She comes barging into our room *far* too early in the damn morning, then tries ordering us around? That takes a lot of nerve!"

"Almost a shame my wild magic didn't trigger around her." Harry said.

"Almost." Tonks agreed. "You okay, Harry? That looked like it hurt..."

"I'll be alright. Gonna need to work with Boris some more on meditation. Maybe once we get back to Hogwarts. If I can keep myself from getting worked up like that, my wild magic won't be *able* to come out. I'll hopefully be able to just tap into it and channel it like normal"

Harry said.

"Good luck." Tonks said. "Wasn't sure what to do back there..."

"It looks worse than it is." Harry said. "Anyway, it's a good thing you didn't try grabbing me. Probably would've gone after you, too."

"Figured as much. Well, at least we don't have to listen to Sirius' mother anymore. He looked right proud of you." Tonks said, grinning.

"Well, I did him a huge favor. Wonder if he, in turn, can rid *us* of Molly Weasley." Harry pondered. "I'll have to ask sometime."

"Y'know... it was really sweet what you said up in the bedroom." Tonks said, cracking an eye open enough to look up at Harry.

"I spoke naught but the truth, milady." Harry replied in a very Lockhart-ish voice.

Tonks snorted. "We *will* have to leave for food eventually. Think she'll still cook for us?"

"Who needs her to?" Asked Harry. "I can cook. And barring that, I'll see if I can't summon a certain House Elf who seems to worship me. I'm sure he could bring us anything we wanted."

"So long as it's Dobby and not Kreacher." Tonks said, making a face. "...Damn it, I'm going to have to leave my wonderfully comfortable spot here before too long, though. I need... socks. I'll be glad when some warming spells get attached to the floors in *this* place."

"If you go for a sock run, grab me a pair too, would you?"

"Will do." Tonks said. And, with much drama, the girl got back to her feet. "I'll be sure to see what kind of aftermath we've left in *your* wake, too."

"Yes, yes, I'm a one-man wrecking crew." Harry said, waving his right hand dismissively.

Tonks returned a few minutes later with socks on. She lobbed Harry a pair as she re-entered. Harry set the book down to catch them, noticing that she hadn't returned alone. Hermione and Ginny were in tow.

"You picked up some extra cargo on your voyage. Good morning, ladies." Harry said, slipping the socks on. "What news bring you of the outside world?"

"Mum's in a mood." Ginny said, sitting down in one of the room's many chairs. "Best not bug her for awhile. Also, you're going to owe Sirius a present or something. Without you around to continue railing on - she won't dare come in here after seeing what you did to that portrait - she decided to go after your closest living relative."

"Ouch. Poor Sirius." Harry said.

"They did get the wall fixed, though." Hermione piped in, staring at the books along the walls and picking out a random one eventually. "I can only assume what happened earlier, but..."

"She barged into our room, saw Tonks and I in bed, and had a fit." Harry said, shrugging. "I wasn't going to put up with that. I realize she probably has a fond place in her heart for me, given I saved Ginny a few years back, but that doesn't give her the right to boss me around."

"She's very overprotective and quite old fashioned." Ginny said, making a face. "By the way, Harry, I went back up to your room and collected Boris for you. He seems a bit miffed you forgot him."

"*Crap. Sorry, Boris.*" Harry hissed as the snake slithered out from Ginny's right shirt sleeve. "*I was distracted.*"

"*Obviously.*" Said Boris. "*That woman certainly had a set of lungs on her.*"

Ginny snorted.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "You laughed."

"Uh-huh."

"...You laughed after he spoke."

"Yeah."

"...You understood him?"

"More or less."

Harry stared. "Well when the hell did *you* pick up 'the gift?'"

Ginny shrugged, hopping up to bring Boris over to Harry. "Dunno. Probably while Riddle had me possessed. Not very good with it yet, though. It doesn't seem to be built into me like it is with you, despite the ordeal in my first year."

"Yeah. Seems to be one of those things you either get born with or never learn." Harry said, letting Boris curl up loosely around his neck. "I could try teaching you, if you wanted. Not sure how well I'd do."

"That's okay." Ginny said. "No offense to Boris or anything, but I'm perfectly happy not knowing more of the language than I already do."

"Yeah, I guess I can understand that. All things considered, you--dammit, Nymmy, what in the name of Azathoth are you *bouncing* for?"

"I just thought of something really fun to do over dinner!" Tonks said in a singsong voice.

Hermione, who had sat down with her book and had been watching this whole exchange, just shook her head and groaned. "I'm not going to like this very much, am I?"

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Dinner that night was a quiet matter, just as Harry was hoping it would be. Molly was doing the lion's share of the cooking, which seemed to take her mind off of other matters. That was fine with Harry. As usual, Order members were coming and going throughout, with only a few being able to sit and stay. Of those taking a break from their various duties were Kingsley Shacklebolt, Mundungus Fletcher and, much to Harry's irritation, Severus Snape.

But even that was alright. Snape would gape like the rest when he put his plan into motion. He had Boris curled up around his upper right arm. The miniature taipan was waiting for Harry to tense up his muscles. That was his cue.

It came not long after everyone was finally seated at the table, their meals being started on. Small talk started to issue from around, with the Order members being vague and secretive about their plans.

When everyone was roughly halfway through their food, Boris started hissing at Harry. Everyone stopped talking and turned to look at him. Harry frowned, glancing down at his arm and hissing back. Of course, neither was saying anything of importance. It was all just small talk in increasingly heated tones. By the time Harry got his last line out (something about how Snape's nose would eventually curve so much it would enter his mouth), they were almost yelling at one another.

Scowling as he looked up, Harry stared at Ginny.

"What?" Asked the redhead.

"Boris says he wants to hang out with you again. Says you 'smell better,' whatever that means." Harry muttered. "Little traitor..."

"Well, clearly your snake has a good taste in women!" Said Ginny, grinning at Harry.

Harry rolled his eyes. "He wants to come over and spend the rest of the meal with you. That alright?"

"Oh, it's perfectly fine." Ginny said, getting up and walking over to Harry, who held up his arm so that Boris could slither from one teen to the other.

"*We'll be having a little talk later.*" Harry said, glaring at the taipan.

"*'Later,' you say.*" Replied the snake, raising his head to turn and look at Harry. "*What makes you think there will BE a later?*"

Harry gaped at the snake before glaring outright once more. "Of course there'll be a later! What are you, planning to stay with *Ginny* now?"

"No he certainly will not." Said Molly.

"Oh come on, mum!" Ginny said as she walked back to her seat. "Boris is adorable!" And then, switching to Parseltongue herself, she continued, "*Cheeky, but adorable nonetheless.*"

The stares around the table increased tenfold. Molly looked horrified, her eyes bulging so wide they threatened to pop out. Harry was biting down hard on his lower lip at this point. Tonks had to duck under the table, pretending to have dropped a spoon, to keep everyone from seeing her shake with laughter.

"Cheeky indeed." Harry mumbled in English. Then, switching to Parseltongue himself, he addressed Ginny. "*They're going to pass out at this rate.*"

Ginny giggled. "*So let them. I'd pay good money to see Snape faint.*"

"*You and me both.*" Harry said, smirking. "*But I have to admit, this isn't very fine.*"

"*It's YOUR plan.*" Ginny pointed out.

"*Why so it is!*" Harry said, looking mock-surprised. "*Well, I guess I'M not very nice, then!*"

"*You're both bananas if you ask me.*" Said Boris in a dry tone.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a look, their eyebrows raised. The two then dissolved into laughter. Tonks finally popped back up, giggling as well.

"Oh man, never have I wished for that Colin kid to be around. I would pay a fair amount for a picture of that. I thought I was going to bust a gut!" Tonks said, wiping at her eyes.

"Yes, I thought it went rather well." Harry agreed. "Bravo, Ginny."

"Oh yes, bravo!" Tonks said.

The two Ravenclaws proceeded to give the Gryffindor girl a golf clap for her acting, to which she only laughed more.

"I've got to stop eating here." Said Snape suddenly, getting to his feet and gliding out of the room.

This, of course, ended up causing Tonks to fall back into a gigglefit.

"If I knew that was all it took to get him out of here, I would've had you do it sooner!" Commented Sirius.

"We aim to please." Harry said, taking Boris back after Ginny walked back over with him.

"Did I do alright?" Asked Ginny.

"You did wonderfully!" Tonks said, her breathing uneven from her laughing.

"How terrible of you." Said Molly. "Pulling my Ginny into something so... so..."

"Hilarious?" Offered Harry.

"Incredible?" Suggested Tonks.

"Snape-repelling?" Sirius tried.

"Awful!" Molly cried. "That horrible language. Absolutely filthy!"

"Oh, don't be stupid. Of course it isn't filthy." Harry said, letting Boris curl up around his neck. "Not worse than speaking any *other* language."

"But it's snake-language! It's unnatural!" Molly exclaimed.

"Yes, well, we're all a bit unnatural in our own ways, aren't we? You, for example, seem to be living in the late 50s." Harry said.

"And I will not have you running your mouth at me, young man! I demand you apologize this instant." Molly huffed.

"You first." Harry said, narrowing his eyes.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You barged into my room without permission and proceeded to have a hissy fit. You then tried to order both myself and Nymmy around." Harry said, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. "I'd say that was more rude than speaking another language at the dinner table, wouldn't you?"

Molly got to her feet, snatched her plate and goblet up, and stared towards the sink with them. "I won't have anyone sleeping around in my house." She said.

"It isn't your house you god damned hippo." Harry growled.

"Oi, don't call my mum a hippo." Ginny said, lightly swatting Harry on the arm.

"When she stops acting like this house is hers and not Sirius', maybe I'll ease up on the insults. But until she starts treating people like rational-thinking humans and not servants or whatever the hell she sees Sirius as, they will persist. Terribly sorry, Gin." Harry said.

Sirius and Lupin watched as Harry argued back and forth with Molly Weasley for the next twenty minutes. It was like a bizarre tennis match. They would look one way, then the other, then back the first

way, and so on. Eventually, Lupin leaned in and whispered, "Harry is managing to go toe to toe with Molly. Rather impressive, I'd say."

"Of course it's impressive." Sirius whispered back, a grin on his face. "He knows he can get away with it. He takes after me quite a lot, I'd say."

"Yes. Quite reckless in who he picks his battles with." Lupin murmured, quietly chuckling.

"Oi oi..."

Harry finally stood up. "You are not the boss of this house and I will not follow any orders you give me. This is his house. If anyone should be telling people what to do, it's him. And yet he's allowed you lot to use it for whatever you need. I don't recall commandeering it from him being part of that, though. Tell me, what gives you the right to boss the rest of us around?"

"I'm older and I'm wiser." Molly said simply.

"You're half right." Harry said, smirking. "And I'm afraid it isn't the latter half. That gnarled old house elf is wiser than *you*, I'm afraid."

"Sirius, will you *please* get him under control?!" Molly finally asked, exasperated.

"What's to get under control? Moony and I started a bet midway through." Sirius said.

"Oh? Who's winning? And what was the bet?" Asked Tonks.

"So far neither of us is winning. If Harry leaves the room first, he wins." Sirius said, grinning.

"You bet against me, Moony?" Asked Harry, a fake pout on his face.

"Very few have ever come out on top of an argument with Molly Weasley. Merely playing the odds, Harry." Lupin said.

"You are the worst role models I have ever seen in my life!" Yelled the woman suddenly, throwing a dish cloth down into the soapy water of the sink. "Do you always plan to let him walk all over people?!"

"You think *you* can. Why shouldn't he?" Asked Sirius darkly, narrowing his eyes at the woman.

"She seems to be under the impression that any house she currently walks about belongs to her. There's no other logical way to explain it." Harry said. "Anyway, I've better things to do than to sit and bicker with her all night. Sorry, Sirius. Looks like Moony's going to win the pot."

"Oh, I don't mind. It was a wonderful after-dinner show." Sirius said cheerfully. "Going to head on up to bed?"

"Not yet. Going to head back to the library. You really don't mind if I snag a few for my own collection?" Asked Harry.

"Nah, feel free. Like I said, *somebody* seems to want to chuck out all the Darker things in there. Someone might as well sweep in and find some before it happens." Sirius said. "That goes for you too, Hermione."

"Really? Well, thank you, then." Hermione said, looking a bit surprised.

Sirius waved a dismissive hand. "Nothing to thank me for. I'm not a huge reader and Moony's usually too busy to sit down and read for very long. Takes him a good while to make it through a single book. As long as you don't clean the place out entirely, it's all good."

"Children their age shouldn't read such things." Molly chimed in.

"We aren't children any more than you are." Harry said, stretching. "I've fought Voldemort. That's more than I can say for you. Nymmy, Hermione, want to hit up the library now?"

"Sure." Said the girls.

"Leon?"

"I'll pass, thank you." Solieyu said, nursing his goblet. "I...am not feeling so good. Most likely I'll retreat to my room before long."

"Ah." Harry said, nodding at him. "Fred? George?"

"We've got other things on our minds." Said George, winking at Harry when he was sure his mother wasn't looking.

"Gin?"

"Need to finish up some Charms homework." She replied, making a face.

"At least Flitwick doesn't overload us." Harry said. "Well then, I guess that's it. We'll be in the library if anyone needs us!"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"I'm amazed your voice hasn't given out." Said Hermione, sitting down in a chair next to a small mountain of stacked books. "I hate to praise you for fighting with her, but..."

"Yeah, Harry really gave her what for. Probably the first time anyone's ever done that, given the amount of indignant sputtering she did." Tonks murmured. "Find anything, Harry?"

"Nothing yet. This back wall is mostly about wars, politics, and spell creation. I've really got no use for any of it." Harry said, walking along the back of the room slowly. "...I want to get to the Darker stuff before Molly gets in here and cleans it out."

"I imagine she and Sirius are having a terrific fight right about now." Tonks said, laying out on the couch.

"Again." Hermione added.

"Yeah. Again."

Harry stared along another wall, heading back towards the girls. "Sirius can hold his own. Plus I'm sure I gave him some good footing

to fight on. Honestly, the old cow needs to just learn to shut up and not mess with anyone else's life when her own is so awful."

"What if she bursts into our room again?" Asked Tonks.

"If it happens again, I'll see about getting Sirius or Moony to make the door password protected or something." Harry said. "...Come to think of it, doing that for the library might not be a bad idea, either."

"Wonder if there are any secret passages. Surely there are." Tonks said. "Usually these ancient manor houses have at least a few."

"There's a lot I'll need to talk to him about, then." Harry said. "Ooh, a book discussing alternatives to apparition for magical travel. If I never experience that again, it'll be too soon. Hang how useful it is."

"Yoink?" Asked Tonks.

"Yoink!" Said Harry, plucking the book from its shelf. "So what kind of books are you looking for, Hermione?"

"Oh, anything that looks interesting. I'm not picky." Hermione said. "I really don't have much interest in the Darker subjects like you do, so if Mrs. Weasley really does purge this place of that kind of thing, I'll still be able to grab a few I want."

"Sounds like a plan." Harry said. "Hmm. A book on house elf magic. Might be worth a read. I want to know how Dobby can pop around the castle like he does. Clearly he isn't apparating. You can't apparate on Hogwarts grounds. Meaning house elf magic bypasses anti-apparition wards. If people gave more of a damn about researching their magic, the castle could be in serious danger some day."

"Ooh, don't even joke about that." Hermione said, shuddering. "You know, I always thought house elves got a bad rap. I was thinking about starting up a club to try and get them some more rights, at least within the school, but the idea sort of fell flat."

"Yeah. Dobby says all the house elves at school really like what they do. Talk of freedom is a taboo subject, it seems." Harry said. "Let's see here. ...Oh, now *here's* an odd one."

"What is it?" Asked Hermione.

"A book on necromancy-related spells." Harry whispered. "Damn, I was almost hoping it would be by Boris' old master."

"Don't even joke about that." Grumbled the snake quietly.

"Sorry. This one's by... Jenever Nemeseia." Harry said, reading the spine. "No worries there?"

"None that I'm aware of." Hissed Boris.

"Good. Into my collection it goes. Oh wicked, a whole section on alchemy..." Harry said, 'ooh'ing as he glanced through the subjects. "...Hey, look. Snape's got a book published! I'm taking this one for the comedic value alone. I can't imagine how it must read. 'You see this brew? This is what it does and these are the ingredients. Use these particularly vague directions. Good luck not exploding your organs.'"

Tonks snickered. "Snape writing a book. I think the thought of him sitting down and writing it is a funnier picture than what the actual contents are."

In the end, Harry wound up with almost a dozen new books, half of them on potions and alchemy. The two bid Hermione a good night and headed back up to their room, Tonks carrying half the load so Harry wouldn't fall over something or run into anybody. Harry packed away the Darker of the books at the bottom of his trunk and chose one on alchemy for that night's reading material.

"We gonna be sleeping like we were last night?" Asked Tonks, moving her clothes to one of the dressers.

"I don't see why not. I'm not altering my sleeping habits to satisfy a crazy old harpy."

"Have I told you that I love you lately?" Asked Tonks, grinning across the room at Harry.

"Not *lately*, no." Harry said, grinning back. "You want in the bathroom first or can I go wash up really quick?"

"Just don't use up all the hot water." Tonks said.

"Roger that." Harry said, disappearing into the bathroom.

Some thirty minutes later, he returned wearing a pair of jeans. As he dried his hair with a towel, he sat on the edge of the bed. "You're up, Nymmy."

"Aww, you should've just changed out here." Tonks said.

"And risk that bloody woman bursting in and seeing me naked? Never." Harry said, shuddering at the thought.

"Ew. I see your point. I don't want her seeing me either. I'll just... take *my* night clothes in there and do what you did." Tonks said, making a face.

"I'll get Sirius on the password protection thing in the morning. And if he and Moony won't or can't do anything, I'll get the twins on it." Harry said.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Asked Tonks, standing in the doorway to the bathroom.

"I think it's better than her seeing one of us in the buff." Harry said.

"...I agree wholeheartedly. I'm going to go try and wash that thought out of my *brains* now!" Tonks said, whining as she closed the door behind her. "If I have nightmares tonight, I'm punching you awake!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Harry called. "Understood, ma'am!"

"Don't be a smartass!" Tonks called back.

"But it's fun!" Harry said. He had to quickly duck to one side as the bathroom door partly opened and Tonks blindly flung her shirt back into the room.

Chapter 7 – Grim Old Findings

The next week passed by rather quickly for Harry. He indeed had to get Sirius and Lupin to work on password protecting his bedroom door, as Molly Weasley made it her duty to barge in every morning. By the time the two Marauders had come up with a good method of implementing the feature, Harry had just about reached his boiling point. The Weasley matron was one more rude awakening away from getting Harry's complete lexicon of spells thrown at her. Tonks had even been discussing which order he should loose them at her should the time come.

"This is great, you guys. Thanks. Really." Harry said, smiling at the outside of the bedroom door.

"We know full well how a rampaging Molly Weasley can be." Said Sirius, patting Harry on the back. "Works just like the guardians at Hogwarts do - you give it a password and no one can enter without it. Anyone who knows the password can gain entrance, of course, so be careful of who you say it around."

"Oh, I've already thought up a password." Harry said. He turned towards the door, which had been fully replaced by a new door bearing an Ouroboros (at Harry's request), switched to Parseltongue, and let loose a long-sounding sentence.

"What'd you say?" Asked Tonks.

"I'd rather not repeat what I said in English." Harry said darkly.

"Was it that bad?" Asked Lupin.

"If I were to say most of that in English, I'd probably get ejected from Hogwarts." Harry said. "...I just hope Ginny isn't capable of understanding it."

"She seemed to be fairly capable of speaking and hearing it when you pulled your prank." Said Lupin.

"True, but this is... uh... colorful. And I highly doubt Riddle went about teaching her the finer points of swearing in Parseltongue." Harry explained.

"Which brings about the point of how you expect *me* to get in there if you aren't around." Said Tonks, prodding Harry in the arm.

"Where the hell will I be that I can't come up, say the password, and let you in?" Asked Harry, eyebrow raised.

"...I guess that's true. Okay, game on. Let's see how tomorrow morning goes." Said Tonks.

"Yeah. This should be interesting." Harry said. "Goodnight, Sirius, Moony. Thanks again for the help."

"Oh, we had a blast." Sirius said. "We've got another bet going on the outcome of this, you know."

"I want to hear all the details after the fact, then." Harry said, chuckling.

"It will be our pleasure." Lupin said, already looking smug, as though he knew he was going to win.

Harry turned towards the door and hissed out the password. The door popped open and he and Tonks entered, waving to Sirius and Lupin as they headed back up the hallway. Closing the door behind him, Harry leaned back against it. "Ahh, we've finally got a bit of privacy."

Tonks grinned. "A lesser girl would surely suggest less than proper things that could happen in such a situation!"

"I'm quite glad you're not a lesser girl, then." Harry said, kissing Tonks as he passed by her. "Our routine for the night going to be as it has been?"

"You can stop asking if I'd like to go in first, you know." Tonks said, sitting on the edge of the bed. "I prefer going in last. That way I can come out, change, and go right to sleep."

"Just making sure." Harry said, heading towards the bathroom. "Hey Boris, you holding up okay? You feeling hungry yet?"

"I'll be feeling it tomorrow, most likely. Somewhere around evening, if I were to guess. By the way, I hear what you used for the password. I've heard drunken sailors curse less than that." Boris replied.

"Yes, well, most drunken sailors haven't run afoul of Molly bloody Weasley, either." Harry said. "She could sober a hobo up at twenty paces with a glare."

"Hobos make their own booze." Tonks said, flopping back in bed and crossing her arms behind her head.

"How would you know if hobos make their own booze?" Asked Harry.

"Mundungus." Tonks replied dryly.

"Damn. Good point. Okay, I'm going on in." Harry said, shaking his head as he walked into the bathroom.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry panted heavily, pressing himself up against a wall. The sound of footsteps paused, then took off down the hallway. Harry waited until he couldn't hear it anymore before he dared to move again. When he did, he took the only other path possible - one that led into a room filled to the brim with small orbs that looked vaguely of crystal balls. There was a strange sensation in this room that he couldn't quite pin down.

He wasn't even sure where he was, really. All he knew was that he was being pursued and he couldn't let them catch up to him. He didn't even know who was chasing him, just that they were the purest of evils he had felt in a long time.

Feeling unnerved as he walked through the rows and rows of glass-like orbs, as though he was being watched, Harry took a moment to collect himself. He had been running for what felt like ages. His lungs were burning for rest. His legs felt that they might fall off at any given

moment. And all for what? He didn't even know what he was *doing* here - wherever 'here' was.

A faint voice filled the air, causing him to freeze. He glanced around one of the rows of orbs back in the direction he had come from. But no, that wasn't right - the voice wasn't coming from out there. It was coming from...

Harry listened closely as he started walking again. The voice was so faint, it was hard to tell just where it was coming from. Thankfully, though, his pursuers never returned. It gave him enough time to search the room and find the sound of the voice. It was actually coming from one of the orbs on a table. It looked no different than any of the other orbs, really. It was clear, perfectly round, and held up by a small, three-pronged device.

But as Harry plucked the orb from the device it was in and brought it up closer to his eyes so as to better see it in the darkness, he could make out something within the orb. He was only barely able to discern what it was before the voice, so faint and distant for all this time, boomed through the area in a cry loud enough to shatter orbs and rattle their shelves.

"HELP ME!"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry jack-knifed, rolling to one side and falling out of bed. He heard his wand rattling on the night stand by the bed and, a moment later, heard it jump into the air. It fell to the ground halfway across the room as he righted himself and sat up, his breathing erratic. His eyes, quite wide at this point, darted back and forth, trying to tell where in the hell he was. The world was dark and, due to the lack of glasses on his face, quite blurry.

"Harry...?" Came Tonks' quiet voice from the bed. She had crawled over to the edge and was looking down at him. "It's okay - you're in Sirius' house. It was just a bad dream. You're safe..."

"I'm... I'm safe..." Harry repeated, his voice quiet. "I'm safe. I'm safe..."

Tonks tugged the covers back and slipped down to the floor next to Harry, offering him his glasses. "Yeah, you're safe. Nothing bad in this house except for Molly Weasley, love."

Harry blinked quickly a few times before clamping his eyes shut and drawing in a long, deep breath. When he opened his eyes again, he looked much better. He smiled wearily at Tonks, taking his glasses from her and sliding them onto his face. "Sorry, Nymmy..."

Tonks wrapped her arms around him, kissing his cheek gently. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It... yeah, it was strange." Harry said. "I was... being chased by someone. A lot of people, actually. Dunno who. I... I managed to evade them and found myself drawn towards this room full of glass orbs. ...There was this really quiet voice that was calling out. I followed it and found it was coming from one of the orbs. Looked alright on the table... but when I picked it up, I... I saw that damned blue gemstone rotating really faintly in the center. And then that voice - the one from the old man - screamed 'help me' loud enough to break the orbs and shake the area... it was just... I wasn't expecting it... I'm okay, Nymmy..."

"Breathe, Harry." Tonks whispered.

Harry closed his eyes again, taking another deep breath. "Sorry. Damn it, I really hope this Occlumency crap can help me with my weird dreams, too..."

"It should." Hissed Boris softly. *"It will take awhile, but it should."*

Harry nodded slowly, sighing as he slumped against Tonks. "Did I scream when I woke up?"

"Nope. You just jerked up, twisted, and fell out of bed. You okay?"
Asked Tonks.

"Only thing bruised is my ego." Harry muttered.

"I've seen worse." Tonks said, smiling.

"Sadly enough, yes." Harry said, shaking his head. "What time is it?"

"Um... looks like it's either four-thirty or five-thirty. Can't see the clock that well..." Tonks said, straining her eyes to try and make out the time on the rather small clock above the door to the hall.

"Damn. Too early to get up, then." Harry said.

"We can if you want. I don't mind." Tonks said, offering Harry a hug. "Think some reading will help clear your head?"

"I... yeah, it might." Harry said. "At the very least, let's get back up on the bed."

"Told you the floor was cold." Tonks said, letting go of Harry and standing back up. "You gonna be able to untangle yourself from the blankets?"

"My nerves are shot, but if I can't extract myself from a couple blankets, I might as well just go dancing up to Voldemort and kick him in the bits." Harry said, scowling as he pulled the blankets from around his body. Once freed, he stood up and put them back on the bed.

"Boy Who Lives Fells Dark Lord Via Kick to Crotch." Tonks said, imagining what the headline of the Daily Prophet might read. "...Sorry, I just can't picture that."

"Neither can I." Harry said, sitting back on the bed. "Urg...stupid gem. The hell does it want me to do? I have no idea where it's located, if it even exists at all."

Tonks crawled back onto the bed, moving back to her spot next to Harry and leaning against the headboard. "Dunno. Maybe you should ask Dumbledore. He'd probably know about obscure stuff like that."

"Yeah, maybe." Harry said, reaching over to the stack of books next to the bed and grabbing one. "My eyes are burning already. Dunno how long I'll be able to keep awake."

"Why not just go back to sleep then?" Asked Tonks.

"I've had enough sleeping for one night." Harry muttered, flipping open the book to the page he had left off earlier that night. "You, on the other hand, have no obligations to remain awake with me. You should try sleeping until breakfast, Nymmy."

"Nah. I'll be alright. If not, I'll drag you up here and we can curl up for a nap together." Tonks said, scooting closer to lean against Harry.

"Yeah, I have a feeling I may end up needing one today." Harry said. "Actually, I may just hole up in here all day. I also have a feeling I'm not going to be in any kind of mood to deal with the old gorgon today."

Tonks slid down slightly to rest her head on Harry's shoulder. "If we're holing up, we should bring in food and make at least one run to collect our friends. Make a day of it or something."

Harry grinned. "Oh, I dunno. I think spending the day with just you would be nice."

"I do believe I like the way you think. Okay, scratch my idea. We're skipping a day!" Tonks declared.

"Been awhile since I did that." Harry said. He scowled at the book, closed it, and set it back on top of the pile, leaning against Tonks. "The only trouble is that this house is pretty boring."

"This is true." Tonks agreed. "So what can we spend the day doing?"

"I'd suggest making a second List just for things we could pull on Molly Weasley, but I'm pretty sure the twins and Ginny wouldn't like us very much for it." Harry said.

"And Ron?" Asked Tonks.

"Ron is a colossal tit no matter what happens, so he can go jump out a window." Harry said through a yawn. "...Hey, Nymmy, you don't suppose Dobby could come and spirit us over to Hogwarts for the day, do you?"

"I'm not sure." Tonks said. "I mean, I dunno quite how house elves work, but I doubt he could find us unless he was told about the house."

"True. Well, we can try it, just to check." Harry said. "...Crap, I don't think my body's going to let me stay up until dawn."

"Wanna try getting some more sleep, then?" Asked Tonks.

"Might as well." Harry said, sliding down under the covers.

Tonks followed his lead, rolling onto her left side and curling back up against him. "Mmm, that's better. I have my pillow back now!"

"Oi, who're you calling a pillow?" Harry asked, kissing Tonks' forehead.

"Who do you think I'm calling a pillow?"

"Ah well. I suppose I can't complain. Having a beautiful girl resting against me isn't exactly the worst thing I could think of." Harry said, chuckling. "Very well, your pillow I shall be. But if you try making any jokes on the matter, I'm gonna duct tape YOU to the ceiling."

"Oh, you're no fun at all. I had one ready to go, too!" Tonks said, pouting.

"Clearly I have bested you in a test of wits, milady. The only option available is to flee into the world of dreams." Harry said.

"If you don't drop the goofy, pompous accent, I'm gonna roll you out of bed again!" Tonks said, laughing.

"Aww. Okay, okay, I'll stop being so silly. Let's try and get some rest, yeah?"

"Sounds good to me. Night, Harry." Tonks murmured, nestling her nose up against his neck.

"Sweet dreams, Nymmy." Harry whispered.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"He is coming. He is coming, you must help me!"

Harry stared around him. He was in a black void. The old voice he had grown to despise was coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Blowing out a sigh through his nose, Harry finally asked, "Who the hell *are* you?! I can't *help* you if I don't know who you are or where you are!"

"I am... it is cold." Came the voice. "Let me show you..."

And, slowly, Harry suddenly had solid ground to stand on. Sadly, it wasn't much brighter than it had been when he was floating in the empty void. "This doesn't tell me a lot, you know."

"I am sorry." Came the voice, sounding tired. "But I cannot move..."

"Look, where in this room are you?" Asked Harry, walking around. The room wasn't very big. It was longer than it was wide. It looked to have six rooms branching off, three on either side. In the center of the room was a pedestal. The architecture was...eerie, to put it mildly. Sharp corners and jagged edges were everywhere.

"I am in front of you." Sighed the voice.

Harry blinked, staring forward. He then tilted his head down. On the pedestal was a small, blue gemstone almost thoroughly caked with dust and grime. "So are you the gemstone or what?"

"Yes. And no." Said the voice. "My name... I cannot recall. I have been here for so long, being force-fed to stay alive..."

"You have no recollection of being brought here? And... how does a gemstone eat, anyway?" Asked Harry.

"I do not consume food as you do. Rather... but no, I don't want to think about it. It hurts to think about it." Whispered the voice.

"So you aren't sure who you are or where, exactly, you're located. I ask again how you expect me to help you on such little information." Harry said, crossing his arms.

"I am sorry. But I fear when I remember it will be too late." Said the voice. "He will have found me by then..."

"He? He who?" Asked Harry.

"What was left behind." Came another voice from behind Harry.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

When Tonks awakened later that day, it was to find Harry missing. She was about to call out to him to see if he was in the bathroom, but the door to it was open. Pouting, she tugged the covers off and slipped out of bed. After changing into more suitable clothing for prowling the house, Tonks left the bedroom. She was thankful that *exiting* the room wasn't going to be an issue.

Figuring it was the best place to look, Tonks headed downstairs and towards the library. Sure enough, Harry was inside. He had about two dozen books spread out on the couch and was flipping through the pages of the one in his hands at an alarming rate. When he reached its end, he slammed it closed, carelessly tossed it to the side, and grabbed another from one of the stacks.

Hermione was also in the room, though she was doing no reading of her own. Rather, she was absorbed in watching Harry scour the pile of books. Noticing Tonks, she waved at her.

"Harry? Oi, what're you doing?" Tonks asked, stepping into the room.

"It's no good." Hermione said. "He's tuned the outside world out. I've been trying to get his attention for about half an hour. I gave up eventually. Dunno what he's searching for in those books. They have nothing to do with one another."

"Any idea how long he's been down here?" Asked Tonks.

"He was here when I arrived." Said Hermione, sighing. "And he was already engrossed in whatever work he's doing."

"Wonder if it has anything to do with his nightmare." Tonks said, kneeling next to the chair Hermione was in.

"He had a nightmare last night?"

"He usually has a few a week." Tonks said. "Anyway, he looked really spooked for awhile. I got him calmed and we got back into bed. I drifted back off fairly easily. Dunno if he did or not."

The two sat, making small talk for awhile, and watched Harry continue his furious searching of the books. Solieyu eventually wandered in, along with Ginny. The girls explained the situation to the new arrivals, who took up watching Harry as well. After nearly an hour of nonstop searching, Harry slammed shut the final book in his stack and chucked it to the side. He stared down at the coffee table in front of him for a moment, eyes glazed over.

"*Dammit!*" He roared, pulling a fist back and hitting the back of the couch. "It can't be *that* damned obscure, can it?!"

"Can *WHAT?*" Asked Tonks.

Harry glanced up, sighing slowly. "A gemstone with a soul attached to it!"

"I think I've missed something here." Ginny said.

"Oh, did that stupid blue gem show back up after we went back to sleep?" Asked Tonks. "What did it want this time?"

"It was more coherent than it ever has been, if this whole ridiculous mess has some kind of basis in reality." Harry explained. "It's being held somewhere against its wishes, is being kept alive against its will, and believes Voldemort will be coming to claim it soon."

"What? Why?" Asked Hermione.

"Couldn't tell you." Harry said. "The old man - I'm just guessing here, since it sounded like one - seemed to be pretty messed up in the head. He didn't know his name, where *exactly* he was, and so on. I don't know what the hell's going on. The infected part of my core spoke to me a little as I spoke to the gemstone, but it didn't know any specifics."

"So you've been doing what, exactly?" Asked Solieyu. "Scanning any books on gems or trapping souls you could run across?"

"Something like that." Harry said. "Trying to see if any of these books has a picture of the place the old guy showed me. Was all black and pointy. I'm wanting to say everything was metallic, but it was honestly hard to tell."

"So what do you plan to do next?" Asked Ginny.

"I dunno. I may run this by Dumbledore, see what he thinks on the matter. There has to be a reason for this." Harry said, running a hand back through his messier-than-normal hair.

"Did I hear my name?" Came a voice from the doorway.

Harry blinked as he looked up, seeing Dumbledore standing there with a faint smile on his face. "...Man, you have good timing."

"So it would seem. In addition to you wanting to speak with me, I have need to speak with you. In addition to the prize money, there was something else you were to get from winning the tournament. I did not want to present it in front of the Diggorys, as it was quite the emotional time. But I wish to give it to you before you return to Hogwarts." Dumbledore explained.

"What is it?" Harry asked, getting to his feet.

"I would prefer this matter to, ah... remain between the two of us, if that is alright." Said Dumbledore, a twinkle in his eyes. "I have no doubt, of course, that there is the chance you may repeat what I say to your friends once I have left."

"So why not just cut out the middle man?" Asked Harry, smirking slightly.

The twinkle faded from the headmaster's eyes for a moment. "Because, I am afraid, there is much to discuss about this object. We may be speaking on the matter well into the day."

"This is something important, isn't it?"

"It is, Harry. And while I pray the object in question will never have to be used, the return of Lord Voldemort makes me think otherwise." Dumbledore said, his voice taking a grave turn.

Harry nodded slowly. As he walked towards the door, he glanced over his shoulder. "Right, then. I'll see you lot in a bit, alright?"

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Dumbledore led Harry to one of the house's many small, den-like rooms. Two chairs were set up near the fireplace, facing one another. It looked as though Dumbledore had set things up before coming to collect him. Dumbledore sat down in one of the chairs with an almost inaudible sigh, as though he wanted anything but to tell Harry what he was about to say. Harry sat across from him and, for awhile, neither spoke.

"A long time ago," Dumbledore began, staring into the crackling flames of the fireplace. "There were three friends, close enough that they may as well have been brothers. Their true names have been lost to the aether. During their time, Dark wizards were rampant and there was very little way to fight back. And, like what is happening now, a leader for them eventually arose. He sought power. He wanted to be feared. He wanted to spread death and confusion across the country.

"When word spread of his growing power, the three men knew they had to try and fight him. They lived in a peaceful town and wanted it to remain that way. The men weren't terribly powerful, really, but they weren't just going to lie down and be taken over by the growing evil. One of the men was an alchemist and served the town brewing potions and tending to the unwell. Another was a stonemason and practically built half the town on his own. The third was a jewelfrafter and was, by far, the wealthiest of the three men. One night, the three got together and spoke of how they could possibly fight such strong Dark magic when they were middle-aged men with no formal combat training.

"It was a question that bothered the three for many a night. Eventually, it was the stonemason who came up with the idea. They would craft a gauntlet - something simple that could be worn - that

would amplify the wearer's power should he or she channel it through the device. This, of course, brought up the subject of how they would even create such an object. Surely, something as powerful as the stonemason suggested would be nearly impossible to create.

"The stonemason spent a few days working on the construction and, in the end, did find a solution. He would make the thing out of the purest gold he could find. The jeweler would cut a pair of gems that could be magically enchanted and embedded into the gauntlet. The alchemist would create a Philosopher's Stone, also to be embedded within it.

"Of course, the other men wondered how two gems, a golden gauntlet, and a Philosopher's Stone could possibly make anything of use. The stonemason explained things step by step to them. First, they would fuse the gauntlet with the Philosopher's Stone. As you well know, Harry, they have the ability to produce an Elixir that can make the owner live forever. But the other men asked how an embedded Stone would work, as it needs to produce a drinkable liquid for the owner to keep his life lengthened.

"The first grim part of the stonemason's plan was revealed then. The gauntlet would fuse with its wearer permanently. The Philosopher's Stone embedded into it would be enchanted to create a slow, constant stream of elixir that would flow directly into the wearer's body. The idea was that if the elixir constantly pumped into the wearer's body, the wearer would live forever and would be able to fight any evil that dared to threaten the lands. The other men were frightened by a concept, as it was indeed a questionable method to use. Making a Philosopher's Stone is no easy feat, and no one had ever tried doing something such as the stonemason suggested. Nonetheless, the two men asked their friend to continue, asking how the two gemstones would work.

"The plan did not get any less grim from that point on, unfortunately. One of the gems would be used to power the gauntlet up and serve as a conduit between the gauntlet's strength and the wizard's. However, this meant that the gemstone had to be capable of some form of thought to be able to help redirect and release the immense

power the gauntlet would be able to generate. The stonemason, therefore, said that the first of the gems would need to hold a human's soul within it.

"The second gemstone would be a sort of 'on switch' for the gauntlet. It would also serve to dissipate any unwanted surges of power. In effect, it was a magical black hole. If the gauntlet threatened the user's life due to a high, unstable concentration of magic, the second gem would activate and lower the potential danger. Naturally, one of the men asked how the gauntlet could kill the user if the Philosopher's Stone would be pumping elixir directly into the body. The answer was quite simple - the elixir merely makes it so that you cannot die naturally. Getting hit by, say, the Killing Curse would still be all it would take to end your life.

"The jewelcrafter and the alchemist were hesitant. They would need to sacrifice many lives to forge the gauntlet. Human souls are used in the creation of the Philosopher's Stone, Harry. It is not a well-known fact. Most think the Stone can simply be created, but such is not the case. The jewelcrafter also would need a soul to stick into one of the two gemstones. This would, however, be quite a different task than the one the alchemist faced. The soul had to be given willingly so that it might retain some form of consciousness after removal in order to work the gauntlet.

"It took many months - months in which the growing evil had spread dangerously close to their village. On the day the three were to meet to forge the gauntlet, however, only the stonemason arrived. Thinking his friends had abandoned their plan, he went to their houses. In the alchemist's workshop, the stonemason found a note alongside a shining, red crystal. It said that he could not bear the thought of the horrible deeds he had done to create the thing and that he would join the other souls within it. Deeply saddened, the stonemason took the Philosopher's Stone and went to seek the jewelcrafter.

"His house was also empty. But, as he had at the alchemist's, the stonemason found a note. It said that he and the alchemist had made a pact - they would help forge the components to the gauntlet, but neither could live with the decidedly evil method they had to use. He had crafted the two gemstones to perfection - one green, one blue.

And, at the end of his note to the stonemason, he said that his own soul would power the blue gem. He would serve as the conduit between gauntlet and wearer.

"Horribly depressed that he had pushed his friends to such a degree, the stonemason nonetheless took the two gems and returned to his own house. He made a promise to himself - that he would ensure his friends' sacrifices wouldn't be in vain. He would wear the gauntlet himself, despite the high danger in the final step of the process. We know very little of what followed, but the stonemason was found dead within a few days, the gauntlet still attached to his arm. The townsmen tried to remove it, but found themselves unable to. It was only after the stonemason's body had rotted and was little more than a skeleton that they were able to remove the device.

"After much research, the scholars of the town determined what had happened. The forging process destroyed his magical core and the backlash from the power overtook the power regulating gem, shut down the conduit gem, and burned the man alive from the inside out. Not wishing this fate on anyone else, the scholars broke the gauntlet and its components apart again. Four men left the village on that day, each heading in a different direction with a piece of the gauntlet."

Here, Dumbledore paused before getting up and walking to a darkened corner of the room, where he picked up a metal box. Walking back and sitting down, the headmaster opened it up. Inside was an ancient-looking gauntlet made of stone. It was cracked and chipped in many places and looked to have seen better days. There were three circular grooves along the back of it, sitting in a row.

"...I don't like where this is going." Harry said, staring at the gauntlet wearily. "You just told me a disturbingly long story and now you're showing me a gauntlet. You don't want me to try creating something like *they* did, do you?"

"Heavens no." Said Dumbledore, holding the box out to Harry, who cautiously took it. "While this is the gauntlet from the story, we have no way of even knowing how to restore it to its former glory. In addition to the three objects needed to forge it, we would need to know the last, critical step of the process. No records were ever found

of *how* the stonemason activated the objects and fused his right arm with the gauntlet. I will, however, let you in on a secret. The Triwizard Tournament was held to find someone worthy enough to take ownership of this gauntlet. It has been in the possession of the Wizengamot for many centuries now, and it was suggested it be brought to light again. After what happened at the Quidditch World Cup, this idea was only strengthened.

"Voldemort's Death Eaters had been quiet ever since you defeated him as a baby, Harry. But their emergence led many to fear what has now come to pass - that Lord Voldemort himself would soon find a way to return. The Tournament was to test one's wits and power. I will not lie to you, Harry - the council believed that trying to reforge the gauntlet might be a necessity one day. But I believe that Tom Riddle is still mortal, no matter what has happened in the past."

"So why give it to me at all?" Asked Harry, picking up the gauntlet and sliding it onto his right hand. It was heavy and completely inflexible. Sliding it back off, he set it gently back into its box, looking back up at Dumbledore.

"Because, Harry, Voldemort *fears* you. You have stopped him on numerous occasions and have even managed to escape from a direct encounter where all of his remaining Death Eaters had converged. Should the need to ever reforge this device take place, I have no doubt you would succeed where the stonemason once failed. I also have no doubt that there is another way to defeat Voldemort. The Order has been busy watching Voldemort's movements and studying his potential weaknesses. Unfortunately, we have not come to any conclusions on the latter subject as of yet." Said Dumbledore.

"The only problem," Harry said, turning to stare at the fireplace, "Is that I own two of the four parts of this thing... and I think I've had contact with a third."

Dumbledore's brow creased. "What do you mean?"

"Back in my first year at Hogwarts, when I was fighting Quirrell... I fell to the ground. A bit of the Philosopher's Stone chipped off of the main block. I've kept it at the bottom of my trunk as a memento of sorts. And... lately - for a while now, in fact - I've had dreams where a

spinning, blue gem would appear and beg for help. Just last night, I had an encounter that left me shaken. After I went back to sleep, I had a more coherent one. We were in a black room and the gemstone was sitting on a pedestal under a small pile of dust and debris. The voice was that of an old man. He said he didn't know who he was or where he was, but he wanted help. ...I think Voldemort is after him. It. Whatever..." Harry explained.

"...This does not bode well, then." Dumbledore said, looking concerned. "If the thing calling to you is the conduit gem, then it may know you were to soon get the gauntlet. It may wish to rejoin the thing and become 'whole' once more..."

"The Stone, one of the gems, and the gauntlet itself..." Harry murmured. "...But didn't you say the gauntlet was made of gold?"

"I did. We have not been able to work out this, either. But this is, without a doubt, the gauntlet from the legend." Said the headmaster.

"Perhaps..." Harry began, staring down at the gauntlet again, "Perhaps the conduit gem knows evil is coming again and wants to help."

"Perhaps." Agreed Dumbledore. "But we do not know of the effects time has had on it, if any. A soul trapped within a gemstone for a countless amount of time... there is no way of knowing if the soul within has become tarnished or simply become insane. That it is coming to you and asking for help is a bad omen, no matter the intent. Worse, I personally know where the other gemstone is located."

"What?" Harry hissed. "...Damn. That means that, if we really had to..."

"The gauntlet could, indeed, be reforged." Dumbledore finished. "May we pray that such an event will never have to take place."

Chapter 8 – Of Things to Come

Molly Weasley was, to put it simply, in a foul mood.

Though she was widely known to get heated over certain subjects, it actually took a lot to get her thoroughly worked up. This was one of those rare occasions. The summer had passed relatively quickly due to all the hustle and bustle within the house's walls, but she felt completely dissatisfied in what she had accomplished thus far. The house was still mostly a mess, books were vanishing from the library at an alarming pace, Sirius was being immature as ever, and then...

And then there was Harry.

If one were to ask Molly Weasley what she thought of the youth, she wouldn't have been able to provide an outright answer. While it was clear that Harry still had a some of his childhood remaining, the adult in him was a confusing affair. Confusing and highly, highly *irritating*. He could usually be found with his nose in a book, soaking in the information at an almost frightening speed. He was quite good at memorization, it seemed. Unfortunately, the books he read often dealt with things that Molly would never have left her own children even pick up, let alone read from cover to cover.

Harry also insisted on sleeping in the same bed with that Tonks girl. Molly's irritation with Sirius extended to his cousin, Andromeda. That woman also seemed to see nothing wrong with two teenaged children sleeping in the same bed. Andromeda Tonks had only dropped in for short visits, what with her job at the Ministry overworking her this summer (for reasons she refused to get into with Molly) and when she did, she usually went up to Harry's room and asked to be let in. The whole of her visits to her daughter and Harry were usually spent up there. What they could possibly be talking about was beyond Molly's imagination. Whatever it was, Molly assumed it was no good.

And despite all of his obvious 'faults,' Harry tended to keep his manners about him, respect his elders, and had even gotten his homework finished early into the holiday. He was clearly intelligent and sometimes could be found merely gazing into the crackling

embers of a fire,
lost in thought.

It was all very strange to Molly, who raised her children on the straight and narrow path she had been following all of her life. Bill and Charlie had grown up to become fully functioning members of society with good jobs. Percy had applied for (and attained) a job at the Ministry upon his graduation. From there, however, she wasn't quite sure what to think. Fred and George had been problematic ever since they were little. And now, all they could think about was opening some kind of silly joke shop. A joke shop! Here in the middle of a war and all they could think about were exploding cards and vomit-inducing candies!

Still, the twins were intelligent in their own right. Molly knew this. She simply wished that they could apply their knowledge to something more useful! And Ron... Molly let out a sigh as she prepared breakfast. If the twins were an oddity, Ron was an outright enigma. She had been severely upset with him as he entered Hogwarts. He had proceeded to make an enemy of Harry and his friends and had done things Molly was mortally embarrassed about. But these days... it was almost like he was a completely different person. She wasn't sure what to make of that. Ron seemed to be almost mellow in his attitude towards things now. It was a sharp departure from his younger, brasher days, to be sure.

And Ginny...

Molly was thankful that Ginny was still alive. It was another thing that confused her about Harry. Harry had risked his life against vastly greater forces and had won. He had beaten a fully grown basilisk at the age of twelve! She knew full grown wizards who hadn't accomplished as much! And to have fought the Dark Lord himself on so many occasions, even facing him directly...

Another sigh escaped the woman's lips. Ginny was growing up to be a bit of a tomboy, but the fact that she was alive was enough. Ginny was her only little girl, and if she had lost her... well, she didn't like to think about what life would have been like without her. She had every reason to grant Harry at least a little leeway in his activities, didn't

she? He wasn't harming anyone. He clearly loved the Tonks girl. It had taken almost a week's worth of attempting to beat that awful password protected door before the twins pulled her aside to have a little chat with her.

They told her of how long Harry and Tonks had been together. How Tonks more or less rescued Harry from his abusive relatives. If Tonks had never done this, they had told her, then Harry might not have gone to Hogwarts. And if that had happened, Ginny would have died in the Chamber, to say nothing of what a restored Voldemort and a basilisk could have done after that. They told her of how they had danced around the issue for almost three and a half years before Harry confessed - in front of the assembled students and faculty of the school, no less! And how, later in the year, Harry had all but dropped to one knee to propose to the girl.

After the talk, Molly had eased off of Harry and Tonks a little, though she still kept a critical eye on them. She might not approve of the way Harry did things, but it was clear that he had a calm head about him whenever he wasn't being riled up. And she thought she had overheard Harry mention something about Occlumency one day. Occlumency, of all things! She knew it was a dangerous time to be alive, just as it had been during Voldemort's first rise to power, but what purpose could Harry have to lock up his memories?

Shaking her head, Molly left the kitchen and started towards his bedroom. If anything could be said for the small fights they had had, it was that Harry had gotten rid of that horrible painting of Mrs. Black. It had made it much easier in the house. Coming to a halt just outside Harry's bedroom, Molly raised a hand and knocked a few times.

"Breakfast is ready! Come down before Ron and the twins eat it all up!"

It had become a morning ritual, almost. The second one she had had to take up, after going and practically dragging Fred and George down to eat. But it kept the peace and Harry seemed much more relaxed around her when she didn't force any issues with him. She just didn't see any excuse why anyone should skip breakfast.

Which brought up another oddity to her. She had barely seen that Reinhardt boy eat at all over the summer! He was scarily thin, to a degree that Molly would classify as quite gaunt. The fact that he rarely seemed to have much energy to him only reinforced her worry. But she was reassured - by Dumbledore himself, in fact - that Solieyu was perfectly healthy, all things considered.

'All things considered indeed.' Thought the woman, scowling as she headed back down towards the kitchen.

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"Just a few days left." Tonks murmured.

"Mm."

"Are you worried? About anything that could happen this year?"

"As much as I usually am." Harry said.

"Gonna tell us what Dumbledore pulled you aside for?" Asked Tonks. Ever since Dumbledore had dragged Harry off that one morning, he had seemed very distant and had refused to speak of what the two had spoken of. Just that it worried him for reasons he couldn't explain. Tonks didn't like that answer one bit.

"If the time comes, I will." Harry said, yawning quietly. "I'd rather not have anyone else worry about it, though."

"Hard not to worry." Tonks muttered, lightly hitting Harry on the chest.

"Sorry, Nymmy." Harry said. "Trust me, though. It wasn't a fun ordeal. Can't imagine it'll get any better, though."

"So... barring any unforeseen things happening, what're our plans this year?" Asked Tonks.

"Haven't given it too much thought. Gonna hunt down my contact to thank him. Going to go about reading up on a possible way to guard the Pit from intruders should anyone find it and get around Levi's

password..." Harry said. "...Aside from that, I'll hopefully get enough free time to sit and train with Boris."

"You're going to get some warming charms on that place's floor. There's some heat from somewhere, but it's quite faint." Boris hissed. "If you want to do what you told me about, we'll definitely need the warmth in there. I won't freeze myself due to your stubbornness."

"Quiet." Harry hissed back. "We'll speak about it when we're alone. I don't like talking in Parseltongue when someone else is in the room. Especially when I'm alone with Nymmy. Makes me feel like I'm hiding something."

"You ARE hiding something." Boris said, sighing.

"Seriously, that's a creepy language." Tonks said, shivering. "Gives me the chills."

"I think your lack of pants gives you the chills, my good woman." Harry said, dryly.

"Quiet, you." Tonks said, swatting Harry's chest again. "Nn... you know, you'd better get Sirius or Lupin on that bookcase thing soon."

"I dunno. I think I could make a couple more just fine on my own." Harry said. "It'd be nice to have some more professional shelves to put the books on, but they've been pretty busy lately. I'd hate to drag them away from that for something this trivial."

"If you insist." Tonks said. "...I hope Dobby took good care of the place while we were gone."

"So do I." Harry said. "But he's pretty loyal to me. I trust him."

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door. It was Molly Weasley, calling out that breakfast was ready. Harry smirked as he heard her retreating footsteps shortly thereafter. Getting their bedroom door password protected was the best thing they'd done all summer. And while they hadn't soundproofed it and it took a week of rude awakenings before Fred and George helped out, it had been worth it. The woman was much more tolerable now. Now if only she would

treat Sirius with more respect. Harry had noticed Andromeda often got her share of cold looks from the woman, as well.

Andromeda hadn't been by but a few times, unfortunately. Whenever she would visit, she would come up to the room and Harry would let her in. It had been an amusing night when he had had to tell her of *why* the door needed a password. Andromeda seemed to not think very highly of Molly Weasley, either.

What Andromeda had been so overworked for was beyond him. She had been forced to deal with a strangely huge influx of paperwork over the last few weeks. Usually, she only had enough time to eat and sleep. The rest of her time was spent working. She had looked pretty haggard on her last visit. There were noticeable bags under her eyes and she kept mumbling about some kind of frog woman. Harry chalked it up to the lack of sleep and didn't think anything of it.

"We gonna head down now?" Asked Tonks, rolling onto her back and stretching.

"If you'd like." Harry said. "We don't have to, you know."

"Well aware. But as much as the woman gets on my nerves, I'll admit her cooking is delicious." Tonks said, grinning as she sat up.

"Then to the breakfast table we go!" Said Harry. "Boris, you want me to bring anything back?"

The snake uncoiled from around a candlestick and looked over at Harry. *"See if you can't get her to make some kind of small game bird for dinner. I could do with something... big."*

"You don't mind how it gets cooked?" Asked Harry.

"If I could get someone to cook those rats, I would." Replied Boris.

"...Nym, be glad you can't understand our dear taipan friend. I think I've lost my appetite." Harry said, making a face as he threw back the covers and slid out of bed.

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"Where, exactly, did my summer go?" Asked Harry, scowling, as he sat down.

"I think Mrs. Weasley ate it." Tonks muttered, sitting down next to him.

"You two are quite lucky she isn't around to hear that." Said Solieyu, sitting across from his friends.

"She wouldn't dare make a move against me. She'd yell a lot, be indignant, but that would be the extent of it all. Anyway, I don't need to worry about that for at least another nine months or so." Harry said.

The three had boarded the Hogwarts Express some twenty minutes before and were only now finding a place to sit. The trip to King's Cross had been a tense affair. They had to go in waves so that they wouldn't attract attention. It was all Harry could do to keep Sirius from tagging along to say goodbye to him at the Platform itself. Thankfully, Lupin had been there to be the voice of reason.

"Don't do anything dangerous." Harry had said.

"I'll try not to, but you know Albus." Sirius had replied, smiling grimly.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was pretty depressing. Harry didn't blame them, of course. Death Eater attacks had been going on all summer. He had tried not to think about it, given that he could do absolutely nothing to prevent them. But the thoughts still crept in during his quiet moments. He didn't like it, but he had no way to stop it, either.

Harry saw more than a few newcomers clinging to their parents and crying. A few of the older crowd weren't handling things much better, fearful that their families would be killed during the school year. The people already on the train talked in hushed tones, stopping as anyone passed by their compartments.

It was thoroughly unnerving to Harry. But, again, he could do nothing about it. And that feeling of complete helplessness was driving him crazy already.

"Have you heard from Luna this summer, Leon?" Harry asked.

"I have. I wish she and her father could move to Grimmauld Place, but she said her father was adamant about not 'running away' or something." Solieyu replied, not looking happy at all about the decision. "At least Luna herself will be safe."

"As safe as anyone can be at Hogwarts." Tonks corrected.

"About that," Harry began, sighing. "I think I might have found something in regards to a possible way to protect the Pit. I only found it last night, though. Hopefully, Molly Weasley won't destroy the library while I'm not there to keep the books safe. I might have to ask Sirius to look for others like it."

"Oh? What kind of protection?" Asked Solieyu.

"I...would rather not say. I'm not sure I can *do* what's required, for one. Second, I'm positive none of our little group would approve of my methods." Harry said.

"And what, exactly, does that mean?" Tonks asked. "You planning to double password the door in Parseltongue or something?"

"No, no. That'd be far too inconvenient. I was thinking more along the lines of... ah... a *living* something." Harry said, looking out the window.

"You want something alive to protect the Pit?" Solieyu said. "...Okay, now I'm worried."

"Whatever it is, promise me you won't seek *Hagrid's* advice on the matter." Tonks pleaded.

"I'm not quite *that* crazy yet." Harry said. "Besides, Hagrid is Dumbledore's lapdog. If I say anything, he'll let it slip *somewhere*, be it to the headmaster or in a pub. This is the kind of thing I'd rather not have anyone know about it. Even after - and this is if I can even accomplish what I want, mind you - I find what I need, I'm hoping that no one ever has to see it."

"Always enigmatic, aren't you?" Came a soft voice from the doorway.

"Luna!" Solieyu said, getting up as the blond girl entered their compartment. "How have you been?"

"I've been alright." Luna said, smiling up at Solieyu, who was at least a head and a half taller than Luna was. "And you?"

"Like Harry's fond of saying, 'about as good as can be expected,' I guess." Solieyu replied, sitting back down.

Luna sat next to him, smiling over at Harry and Tonks. "And the two of you?" She asked.

"He stole my line." Harry said, pouting.

"We've been good, considering we were chased by dementors." Tonks said.

"Yes, I heard about that from my father. You were quite lucky to escape." Luna said.

"We were." Harry agreed. "I really hope I can escape from the crowds and get a talk in with the guy who warned me."

"You realize I'm going to be curious." Tonks commented.

"Well aware, Nym." Harry said, grinning aside at the girl. "Which is why I hope to catch him while *YOU TWO* are in your Magical Creatures class."

"What makes you think I plan to keep it?" Asked Tonks, grinning in a distinctively feral manner.

"Because it's a simple class and the less stress this year, the better?" Harry said.

"Damn. Okay, okay. I promise not to pry. If you go after whoever this guy is, I won't follow. Alright?"

"I appreciate it." Harry said.

After another half hour, everyone who was planning to board had done so. The windows were open in many compartments and, as the

train left the station, Harry could hear many of the kids calling to their parents and saying goodbye. He prayed that this goodbye wouldn't be the last one for any of them.

"Speaking of goodbyes..." Harry began slowly. "Has anyone we know been affected?"

"I didn't recognize any of the names." Luna said, her voice low. "But that doesn't change the fact..."

"That they're dead. Yeah." Harry finished, shaking his head. "I'll find a way to stop him again. I just... I need a battle plan this time. It isn't a simple matter of rushing in headlong and hoping for the best. He's amassing a small army and I have to be ready for any of it. It's thoroughly disgusting."

"I wish I had some ties to the vampire community." Solieyu said, glancing over at the compartment door. "I'd be able to find out if they were aligning themselves with Voldemort or not."

"Too risky." Harry said. "They'd probably do anything to get you with their ranks. I dunno how secure Sirius' house really is, but I can't imagine an onslaught of full-powered vampires would be a good thing."

"Think this'll be a quiet ride, or do you think people will loosen up and drop by eventually?" Asked Tonks.

"They'll probably loosen up." Harry said. "Can't imagine them sitting still and whispering the whole trip. I'd imagine they'll go looking for their friends."

"Does that mean we *won't* be exempt from dealing with Malfoy?" Tonks whined.

"I'm afraid not." Harry said. "I'm almost positive he'll stop by eventually."

"Damn." Tonks swore. "I was hoping he would stay off with his daddy dearest and not darken our compartment for once."

"We should be so lucky." Harry said.

The next few hours proved Harry to be right. After awhile, people *did* start to leave their compartments and hunt down their friends. It started slow at first, but once the momentum was built up, it was the usual madness on the Express. It even seemed to relax Harry, who had been feeling tense for some time now. Fearful that the train might come to a grinding halt for one reason or another. Attacking the train en route would prove a point to the wizarding world, Harry was sure of that.

He wondered if any guards were stationed around the train. He hadn't picked up on any hints of such a thing occurring as they were leaving Sirius' house, but with the Order, Harry could never be one hundred percent sure of anything. It was starting to get dark when it happened. Harry was wondering if it actually would or not. In a strange, backwards way, it was also reassuring.

"Hullo, Malfoy." Harry said, looking towards the now-open compartment door where Draco Malfoy stood. "...Where are your 'friends' at?"

"Afraid to leave their compartments, the cowards." Malfoy said, his voice dry. "I see you've managed to stay alive yet another summer. Tragic."

Harry nodded. "Yes, though I did experience a bit of excitement. Oh, I would love to not have to see your face again, believe me. But circumstances just wouldn't allow it."

"How very sad. I was hoping to have a Potter-free year." Malfoy said, bringing up one hand and staring at his fingernails. "A pity, really."

"So why did you decide to come by alone?" Asked Tonks, glaring at the blonde. "Were you really feeling that ballsy? Think you can take all four of us, do you?"

"She's right, Malfoy. It's dangerous being alone in times like this." Harry said, smirking at the Slytherin. "You should run while you still can. Or have you made that decision already and are just waiting for an opening?"

Malfoy returned the smirk. "I don't run from anyone or anything, Potter. You should know that by now."

"Yes, you're more the type to stand up and risk getting knocked down than to take the safe route, aren't you?" Harry said, arms crossing.

"Better to save face in front of those who look up to you than to make an arse of yourself and be ostracized for your choice." Malfoy replied.

"Perhaps you're simply too scared to do the 'right' thing in situations like those." Harry said, smiling pleasantly. "I'll say it again, Malfoy - you should run while you still can."

"And if I don't?" Asked Malfoy, his grey eyes narrowing.

"Then I'll do whatever it takes to keep my friends safe." Harry said.

Malfoy gave Harry a calculating look before smirking again. "I see. You should be careful who you call your friend, Potter. You never know who might turn out to be an enemy."

"I'll cross that bridge if I come to it, Malfoy." Harry said. "I'd rather protect someone and fall doing it than to hide and save my own skin."

"How are you not a Gryffindor?" Asked Malfoy, eyebrow cocking slightly.

"I think too much." Said Harry, sighing as he closed his eyes and tilted his head back.

"You should never take your eyes off of your enemy, Potter. Don't you know that? You're supposed to be Ravenclaw's finest, after all." Malfoy said.

"I know who I should and shouldn't keep track of, thank you." Harry replied. Then, making a 'shoo' motion with his left hand, he continued, "You'd best get back to your group of cowards, Malfoy. They may wet themselves in fear without their leader around to reassure them that they're safe."

"They won't be safe no matter if I'm there or not." Said Malfoy, turning and stepping back into the hall. "No one will. You can say all you like about protecting those close to you and standing up for yourself... but that isn't how the real world works. You'll lose, Potter. Sooner or later, he'll manage to catch you at your weakest."

"A problem I intend to fix." Said Harry.

"How so?" Asked Malfoy.

"Ah-ah, Malfoy." Harry said, smirking. "What fun would it be if I spoiled everything at this point?"

"I suppose you're right. We'll see how well you cope with what's going to happen this year." Malfoy said, his eyes lighting up in an eerie sort of way. "You have no idea what's in store for you."

"And what does that mean?" Asked Harry.

"Ah-ah, Potter." Malfoy said, his smirk growing vicious. "What fun would it be if I spoiled everything at this point?"

And with that, Draco Malfoy closed the compartment door and walked back up the hall. Harry glared openly at the door for a few minutes before blowing out a sigh and bringing a hand up to rub at his temples. "I need some damn aspirin."

"That was like watching a tennis match." Solieyu muttered.

"Yeah, that was *weird*." Tonks said. "The fact that he came alone at all was strange, don't you think?"

"I think," Luna began, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "That he's sitting by himself."

"So do I." Said Harry, his gaze turning to the window. Watching as the countryside passed them by, he smiled crookedly. "So do I."

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"A frog!" Harry growled, hands slamming onto the back of the couch in the Pit. He glared forward at the fire as its flames crackled. *"A frog is setting off the alarms this year! Seriously?! Is that old bastard not even trying anymore? She's clearly out for me! And I'm not just being paranoid this time! Nothing about that horrible woman screams 'trust me, I'm a kind old woman who'll teach you how not to die!' God, is there some kind of curse on me or something, because this is completely ridiculous!"*

"It's really creepy when you rant in Parseltongue, you know." Tonks commented dryly, walking around the couch and sitting at one end.

"Damn it, was I doing that again? Sorry. Boris, warn me if I slip into it, would you?" Harry asked, sighing.

"Consider it done. Impressive, though." Boris replied.

"You know," George Weasley said, leaning back against a wall. "Our dad was talking about someone who looked like her last week."

"Very much like our dear brother Percy, actually." Fred added, standing next to his twin. "Both enjoy sucking up to their superiors in hopes of getting a promotion."

"Your dad?" Harry said, looking at the twins. "...Let me guess, then. The frog works at the Ministry?"

"If it's the same woman, she does." George said.

"Can I have one single effing year where someone isn't out to get me?" Harry wondered aloud.

"You don't *know* she's out for you, Potter." Said Pansy Parkinson, who was sitting in one of the chairs towards the back of the room. "Stop being so damn paranoid. The world doesn't revolve around you."

"Have you seen the papers?" Ginny asked, glancing at the Slytherin from the other reading chair. "Fudge has publicly stated that Voldemort hasn't returned!"

"Figures. Yeah, if Fudge is doing that, he's probably sent the frog here to keep an eye on Dumbledore for him." Harry said, running a hand back through his hair. "Okay, so what does that mean? Well, Dumbledore outwardly stated to *all* of us that Voldemort is back in his little speech. I was watching her. She had one of those looks McGonagall has if someone rubs her the wrong damn way. Only it looked about a hundred times worse."

"Meaning that Dumbledore and Fudge are officially having a spat and the Minister has decided to ignore the murders taking place." Solieyu added, sitting at the other end of the couch. Luna sat on the arm next to him.

"So the Ministry has someone inside Hogwarts to try and ensure that Dumbldore doesn't, what, 'preach his lies' or someone to brainwash us students?" Harry asked. "You know, I normally wouldn't say something like this, but I hope Voldemort tortures that fat little jackass!"

"Harry!" Hermione said, eyebrows raised.

"What?! Are you telling me you *wouldn't* want Fudge out of the picture? It'd be so much easier to deal with Voldemort if we got someone *intelligent* in the position! The public apparently wants to believe Fudge. And while I can't *blame* them for their train of thought, it's like trying to ignore a huge bloody meteor as it flies towards the Earth!" Harry said.

"So what's our plan for this year?" Asked Fred.

"Survive." Harry said, sighing. "Survive and try not to give that god damned frog a reason to try taking control. Because you know that's exactly what this is about. If Umbridge reports to Fudge saying that any of the teachers aren't doing things up to some ridiculous standard or if Dumbledore continues to speak about Voldemort returning, Fudge will do *something* to try getting control of Hogwarts away from him."

"He can't do that, can he?" Tonks asked. "Surely there are rules preventing that."

"He's the Minister." Pansy muttered. "What he says goes. Hogwarts is 'merely' a place of learning. If the Minister wants to arrest control of the school from Dumbledore - if he really wanted to - he could do it."

Harry groaned and spun around, slumping to the ground behind the couch and leaning against it. "I know I'm supposed to be some kind of stupid hero for the wizarding world, but can't I get some time off once in awhile?"

"Superman never gets the day off." Luna said, tilting her head.

"Pansy. I'm assuming you have something to report on?" Harry said, lifting his head to look at the girl.

"Report? I wasn't aware I was to take notes. But yes, Potter, 'something' happened. Those of us who have Death Eater parents were taken to see him." Pansy said, her voice getting softer.

"Him." Harry repeated. "...Yeah. Lovely man, isn't he?"

Allowing herself to shudder, Pansy stared down towards the ground and continued, "I didn't expect him to look so..."

"Snakelike?" Harry offered.

"Snakelike." Pansy said, nodding. "And he gives off this aura of... I don't know what. But it scared me. It scared all of us. ...Well, almost all of us."

"Almost?"

"Draco didn't cower." Pansy said. "Draco isn't afraid of anything, I don't think. That or he's found a way to shut down his fear so it doesn't register, because he managed to stand up straight and face the Dark Lord without so much as a flinch."

"Sounds like Malfoy." Harry said, nodding. "Too damn stupid to know when he's outclassed."

"Yeah, but... you should've seen what he looked like after our fun little meeting was over with. If looks could kill, none of us would've left there alive." Pansy said.

"Why? What happened?" Asked Harry.

"Well... we all arrived at... some mansion, I guess it was. Big place. We arrived really early, too. It had to be around dawn. Anyway, our parents had their ridiculous masks and cloaks on, but none of us had the 'privilege' of such things yet. We were to be introduced to the Dark Lord and he was going to speak with us. That's what I was told, anyway. Once we were all there, we were ushered into this large room - it would've put the Great Hall to shame - and there he was. On some horrible, twisted throne. He had some wisp of a man kneeling down next to him..."

"*Wormtail*." Harry hissed, knowing full well he had slipped into Parseltongue that time.

"You just said his name, didn't you?" Pansy asked, glancing up.

"Names tend to sound the same, yes." Harry said.

"...Yeah. Wormtail. Horrible little parasite. Once we had entered, the doors closed behind us and, almost as one, our parents knelt. Draco gave his parents a strange look then..." Pansy said.

"You noticed?" Tonks asked.

"I was looking at *him* so I didn't have to look at ***him***." Pansy said, glaring at Tonks. "So then *he* stands up and walks towards us. And everyone standing near me just visibly started to shake. I won't lie, I did too. It... I can't even describe the feeling..."

"It's like a dementor, only about a thousand times worse because you know you can't banish Voldemort away." Harry whispered. "He's there and if he has you in his sights, you don't have many options."

"Yes. Exactly. Draco was the only one with his head raised high. He suffered for it. The Dark Lord hit him with the Cruciatus. Twice. The

second time because he stood back up and raised his head defiantly against him." Pansy said.

"Bully for Malfoy. He's too stupid to stay down." Harry said.

"He told us we were to be the next generation of his Death Eaters. That, together, we would forge a new age. One free of mudbloods and Muggles polluting it - his words, not mine. We were to receive the Mark over the Christmas holiday and, more or less, act as his spies within Hogwarts' walls." Pansy said.

"Oh, that's just lovely." Harry spat. "So I'm being hit from both sides! Fudge and Voldemort might as well get married and go skipping off into the sunset! If Fudge succeeds, Dumbledore will probably have to leave the school. And since Dumbledore keeps this place safe, Voldemort could lay siege to Hogwarts any time he wanted!"

"What? No. He couldn't..." Hermione said, hand raised to her mouth.

"Oh yes he could. Voldemort fears Dumbledore. Dumbledore is pretty much the only thing keeping the school safe. Remove the headmaster from the picture and what happens?" Harry asked. "What else happened, Pansy?"

"Not a lot. He rambled on and on and on about how purebloods were superior, how Dumbledore needs to jump off the top of the school, and how *you* are to be saved for *him*." Pansy said.

"Yeah, I can't imagine Voldemort would be too happy if one of his little ass-kissers killed me. I got away from him. I've stopped him in the past - on several occasions in several forms. I'm sure he wants to savor picking me off himself. Not that I intend to let him." Harry said.

"He also talked about a little experiment to try getting to you early." Pansy said.

"Dementors." Harry said, smiling darkly.

"How did you know?" Asked Pansy, eyebrows raised.

"Because he went *through* with it." Harry said. "They got my cousin. I got a warning from someone, though. I knew they were coming."

Pansy stared at Harry. "You got a warning from someone?"

Harry smirked. "I got a warning from someone. Becoming deaf, Parkinson?"

"Someone obviously has a death wish." Pansy said, shaking her head. "If they ever get caught, they're dead. They're worse than dead."

"I have a bad tendency of having extremely good luck in extremely bad situations." Harry said, chuckling. "Well, it's good to know I wasn't being lied to. I've had my doubts off and on all summer. Hearing you mention it, though... that's all I need to know."

"Do you know who it was?" Asked Pansy.

"Hah!" Tonks exclaimed. "None of *us* have been able to pry the information from him so far. And trust me, we've tried."

"Having secrets, are you? Secrets aren't good things to be carrying around in a war, Potter." Said Pansy. "...Anyway, as I was saying, he ranted for awhile. Then our parents escorted us out into another room before returning to finish their meeting. Leaving us to stew in our own juices, so to speak. None of us really talked, though. Draco went off to recover in a corner of the room. He wasn't looking so hot. It was about a half hour later that our parents collected us and we all went home."

"Great. Any idea how many potential survivors we have out of the lot of kids you saw there? How many do you think will try fighting?" Harry asked.

"None, if I were completely honest with you. Before we saw him and he spoke to us, I'd say a good third of them might have been savable. But afterwards? I don't know. I glanced around the room when the lot of us were alone. I didn't like what I saw." Pansy admitted.

"My luck could not get worse if I tried. I know this is going to sound completely ridiculous to everyone, but... what about Malfoy?" Harry asked.

"I'm... I honestly don't know, Potter." Pansy said, looking troubled. "I'm going to try bringing the subject up this year, but you know him. He'd rather die than to work on the same 'side' as you."

"Yes, but he's also out to protect his own hide and to keep his honor about him. Voldemort stripped him of that in front of his own parents and a mass of his peers. I can't imagine the big ponce would be too willing to support his precious Dark Lord after that. And, of course, he got hit twice by the Cruciatus. I'm sure that left an impression." Harry said.

"I honestly don't know." Pansy said, sighing. "Like I said, I'll try talking to him. Don't expect a miracle, though."

"Draco isn't stupid." Harry said, standing back up again. "He's a complete asshole, he only looks out for himself, and he still holds Voldemort's ideals as the one true way, but he's not stupid."

"Coulda fooled me." Ginny muttered darkly.

"Draco views the world in black and white. And right now he's stuck between those two colors. If he joins Voldemort, he knows what he'll be reduced to for sticking to his ideals. But if he joins us, he'll be siding with people he hates. So what's he to do? It's very simple. He will join us until he sees a chance to backstab us. That's what I think, anyway." Harry said. "Pansy. If he says he'll fight, bring him here."

This sentence immediately caused an uproar in the Pit amongst almost everyone in it. But Harry simply crossed his arms and closed his eyes, waiting for the din to die down before speaking again. "Draco is powerful. And we need all the allies we can get in this fight. I hate the little bastard as much as any of you. But I'll be damned if I let Voldemort get to him first. I can deal with him once he turns on us. And if *any* of you have a problem with the way I intend to run things from this point forward, you can get the hell out of here. You won't be welcomed back. Voldemort is after me. Above all other things, he

wants me dead. And if I feel I can't trust someone completely, I won't let them come here."

"And you trust him completely, do you?" Fred asked, looking rather disgusted with Harry.

"I trust him with my life, if that's what you mean." Harry said, walking towards the bedroom door.

"Why?"

"Like I said - he isn't stupid. If he thinks he can save his own hide, he'll come around eventually." Harry said, his voice quiet as he opened the door.

"*Tell them.*" Boris hissed softly.

"*No.*" Harry hissed back.

"*They deserve to know. They need a reason.*" Boris replied.

"*I gave my word.*" Harry said. "*How did you work it out?*"

"*I'm very observant.*"

"*So it would seem.*" Harry hissed. Then, switching back to English, he spoke a little louder. "You're free to remain in the Pit as long as you'd like. If you leave, you go in small numbers to avoid drawing attention. I have plans to increase the Pit's security this year, if all goes well. Think of me and my decisions how you will. I trust that if any of you plan to back out, you'll tell me to my face. That I would trust Draco with my life should be good enough. I'm going to bed."

With that, Harry stepped through the door and into the bedroom, closing it behind him.

And, across the room, Ginny stared after him with wide eyes.

Chapter 9 – Frogspawn

"You feeling better this morning?" Tonks asked.

"I felt fine last night." Harry stated. "A bit fed up with life as a whole, but fine."

"You've got a very odd definition of 'fine,' love."

"Nothing about me is normal. Haven't you realized? What happened after I came in here last night, anyway? I'm morbidly curious."

Tonks shrugged. "The twins were the first to leave. Looked conflicted. Hermione and Ginny were out next. Neither of them talked too much. Pansy didn't last long after. Leon and Luna said they were heading up to the Nest for awhile to talk about it. Then I took a bath and hopped in bed."

Harry nodded. "...Do we have to *leave* bed? Can't I just have Dumbledore deliver my lessons to me directly? I know he can do it."

Tonks giggled. "Yeah, I can just imagine that conversation going well. 'Professor, you're a jackass. Stop hiring people who want me dead. I'm going to spend the year sulking in my hole in the ground and becoming a vampire. Bring me my homework!' - Yeah, I don't think it would fly."

"Oh, be quiet." Harry muttered. "Anyway, I'm just saying. I'd rather stay curled up with you than to go out there and deal with that... that..."

"*Frogspawn?*" Suggested Boris.

"Frogspawn! Exactly." Harry said. Tonks giggled again.

"Sorry, Harry. If I have to go to classes, so do you." Tonks said. "Sucks that we have her first thing after breakfast though, doesn't it?"

"I'd rather have a sick Buckbeak fly over me than to go to Umbridge's class." Harry groaned.

"Lovely thought there. Thanks." Tonks said, swatting Harry's chest.

"Sorry. Okay, okay. I'll get up. Just know I do not do so willingly! ...Basically, I need to know what the titanic frogspawn's got planned." Harry said, sighing.

"Two galleons says she's still not as inept as Lockhart was." Tonks said quickly.

"...You're on."

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As it turned out, Harry won the bet. Not only was Umbridge apparently more inept than Lockhart was, the only thing that they did for most of the class was sit and read through their Defense textbook. It was a baffling turn of events and one that Harry hadn't been counting on. He had been expecting at least a little practical application. But it seemed like Umbridge was bound and determined to make Defense Against the Dark Arts as horribly boring as any one person *could*.

It was also a bit of a problem for Harry. He was a fast reader. Not only was he fast, he tended to absorb almost everything he read. The twins had often joked about Harry and Hermione having a 'read-off' of sorts to determine which of them was faster and who memorized the most in the time given. Despite his own skills, Harry still wasn't entirely sure he could beat the brainy Gryffindor girl. Hermione was scary sometimes.

They had been given an hour and a half of the two hours the class spanned to read the first four chapters, making notes on anything they thought was useful. Umbridge apparently was going to have a verbal quiz or something during the last quarter of the class. It was more than slightly annoying to Harry when he reached the end of chapter four within the first half hour. He also hadn't made any notes because he didn't *need* them. He already *knew* most of the things written in the textbook. It was all very basic stuff. Far more basic than Harry was expecting for fifth-year material.

So he decided to try killing some more time and re-read the chapters. It took less time than before as he ended up skipping bits that were quite well-burned into his memory. With slightly more than an hour left to the class, he closed his textbook and stared down at the blank sheet of parchment in front of him.

'If she keeps doing this each class,' Harry thought, 'then we're going to hit the end of the book within the month, surely. What the hell are we going to be doing AFTER that?'

"Mr. Potter?" Said Umbridge, walking across the room to stand next to Harry. "Is there a reason your book is closed and you've made no notes?"

"I've already read the chapters twice, professor. And I know most of what was written." Harry replied, forcing himself not to let any traces of irritation enter his voice. The frog-like woman's voice was grating to his nerves and she stank of excess perfume.

"I see." Umbridge said, glancing down her nose at Harry. "Then, perhaps, you can answer a few of the questions I was going to ask once everyone had finished."

"If you'd like, professor." Said Harry, forcing out a fake smile.

Walking back up to her desk, Umbridge sat down and picked up a book. She flipped it open to a dogeared page. After clearing her throat, Umbridge glanced up at Harry and asked, "What did Mr. Slinkhard feel was the best way to deal with an attacker?"

"Magical or non-magical?" Harry asked back.

"Magical." Said Umbridge.

Blowing out an inaudible sigh, Harry drew in a breath. "Slinkhard felt the most proper way to handle an attack by a magical source - magical in this case being another witch or wizard - was to defend yourself until Aurors appeared. I'm not entirely sure how valid his statement is, however, as one could be in a position where this simply isn't an option. If one were to be somewhere not heavily populated, for instance. Who would be there to get ahold of an Auror?

Moreover, even in densely populated areas, the chances of not only having another witch or wizard present at the time but also one who would contact the proper authorities would be quite slim. Surely one cannot simply bunker down and hold a shield spell against an aggressive and openly hostile person."

The class was silent. Even Umbridge looked a bit surprised with the length of Harry's reply. It passed quickly, however, and the professor cleared her throat in that horribly irritating way again. "*Hem hem*. I did not ask your opinion on Mr. Slinkhard's teachings, Mr. Potter. Five points from Ravenclaw."

"I apologize, professor." Harry said, his fake smile growing slightly. "I merely thought it strange that he wouldn't consider the variables."

Ignoring Harry's extra statement, Umbridge glanced back at her book before asking, "And what spells do Mr. Slinkhard feel are best used for defending one's self in a hostile situation?"

"He feels that shield charms are the most viable option." Harry replied. "However, once again I find fault with his supposed teachings. Only minor shield charms are mentioned. *Protego*, one of the strongest shield charms, is never brought up, despite the fact that it is, perhaps, the best all-around shield charm to use. Against a single attacker or multiple ones, you'll get the most use out of the *Protego* shield. Lesser shields also have a bad tendency to quickly break or to not cover a wide area. Against a single opponent, a single, small shield charm directly in front of yourself would suffice. But if you were being flanked and couldn't manage two shields at once? And unless there was some chance your enemies remained stationary the entire time, you'd do best to have one large shield that covered all sides, would you not?"

"Again, Mr. Potter - I did not ask your opinions. Another five points from Ravenclaw." Said Umbridge, smiling at Harry.

Harry nodded his head slightly to acknowledge the woman and, once he saw that she wasn't going to badger him with more stupid questions, flipped his book back open to read ahead in the book. It really was quite pathetic. Wilbert Slinkhard, the author of *Defensive Magical Theory*, sounded like the type of man who had never entered

combat in his life, yet felt like he was an authority on the matter. To Harry, anyone who hadn't had their life directly threatened in a fight had no business trying to write a book on the matter. Much less one that tried to teach students. The last thing Hogwarts needed was more poorly-trained fighters now that Voldemort had returned.

When the final half hour of class rolled around - Harry was surprised to see many people still reading - Umbridge asked the class to close their textbooks. And, at random, she started picking people and began asking questions again. Harry was baffled by just how many people couldn't get a single thing correct. The only excuse Harry could find was that everyone found the book too damned boring to read. He couldn't really blame them for it, either. *He* could write a better book than Slinkhard had!

"Mr. Potter." Umbridge said, looking to Harry once more.

"Yes, professor?" Asked Harry.

"Can you tell us what Mr. Slinkhard had to say in regards to the Unforgivable Curses?"

Oh yes. He *could* tell her what Slinkhard had to say. That they were cruel and disgusting spells that only the depraved would ever think of using. But, feeling a headache growing, Harry blew out another sigh - an audible one this time - and replied, "What any other person with half a brain would think, I suppose, though I can't speak for the Slytherins."

Stifled laughs could be heard in the silence that followed. It looked as if Harry wasn't alone in feeling that Umbridge's so-called teaching methods were more than a bit questionable.

"I feel that students should watch their mouths around their teachers." Umbridge said, that strange smile still on her frog-like face. "And I feel that smarting off to one's teacher when he or she is clearly smarter than you is a very foolish thing to do."

"If you're clearly smarter than me," Harry began, "Then I'll eat this stupid book."

There were no laughs this time, though Harry thought he heard a few quiet gasps. Even Tonks was looking at him with a cocked eyebrow.

"I beg your pardon?" Umbridge said, eyebrows raised.

"You heard me." Harry said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. "I know people who have risked their lives in fights. I've *been* in fights. I had to escape from Voldemort himself last year. This Slinkhard guy? I bet he's never had even a mild, childish hex thrown at him. I've heard people speak like this guy writes - pompously. He believes that following a straight and narrow path without deviation is the best way to get anything done. But let me ask you something, *professor* - if Voldemort hadn't decided to make his followers back off last year; if he had told them they were free to come after me too, what would I do? Throw up a simple little shield charm and pray against all logical hope that the Aurors would somehow magically know where I was? In addition, what would they have *done*? The Death Eaters, yeah, maybe they could've beaten them. But Voldemort? No, I don't think so. The rules change when one is fighting *him*, **PROFESSOR**. In fact, I'd say the rules go out the bloody god damned *window* when fighting *him*. You do what you can to survive. You don't sit there like an idiot with a shield charm raised and hope someone will save your ass."

If there was silence before, it was nothing to what filled the air now. Now no one was even *moving*. Harry had never really told his story to anyone outside of his inner circle and Dumbledore. Sure, the headmaster had stated that Cedric had been murdered by Voldemort and that Voldemort had indeed returned. But hearing Harry actually state, at least in summary, what he had happen to him? That was a different story altogether.

Something was churning inside of Harry. He didn't know what it was about this woman that rubbed him the wrong way. He didn't know why he had gotten to his feet and slammed his hands down on the desk midway through his rant. It couldn't have simply been the fact that this stupid frogspawn was working for that blithering dolt Fudge. Harry could deal with Fudge and any of his insipid minions. So what had caused him to snap like that?

"Detention, Mr. Potter." Said Umbridge who, throughout Harry's entire rant, had kept smiling. "For yelling at a professor, telling blatant lies, and swearing."

Ah yes. There was the reason. Fudge didn't believe that Voldemort had returned. So naturally, his followers wouldn't, either. That was what was irritating Harry about Umbridge. But he was in a mood and didn't much feel like listening to Umbridge call him a liar in front of the assembled fifth year Ravenclaws.

"And what lies, exactly, would those be?" Harry asked, his voice low.

"Why, speaking of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named as though he were back, of course." Said Umbridge.

"Voldemort." Harry said. "His name... is *VOLDEMORT*. And yes, he *is* back. I had to escape from him. He murdered a friend of mine. He and his followers have killed more than just Cedric since his resurrection. And how would you and that idiot boss of yours explain all of the killings? The Dark Marks being thrown into the air? I suppose it's all just one big coincidence, isn't it?"

"I think an extra week of detention is in order for your continued outburst." Umbridge said.

"*Good luck enforcing it, you cow.*" Harry hissed in Parseltongue as he collected his things and headed for the door.

"I don't believe I told you that you could leave, Mr. Potter." Said Umbridge.

"I don't believe I asked." Harry sniped in a growl. The door to the room flew open, seemingly of its own accord. And, as Harry stepped out, it slammed shut behind him.

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Harry heard the door to the Pit open slowly. There was much whispered arguing from outside before it opened fully to allow the group access. He was sitting on the center of the couch and staring

at the fireplace. Boris was curled up around his neck. His arms were stretched out along the back of the couch.

"Feeling alright?" Asked Tonks as she walked over.

"Better than I have in awhile. I'm not going back to her class, by the way." Harry stated in a dull voice.

"C'mon, mate. Go back at least once more." Came Fred Weasley's voice from somewhere in the center of the room. "We want to hang around outside the door and listen. Our little Nymmy here collected us and told us what you did."

"We've brought lozenges." Said Luna.

"My throat's fine." Harry said. "Feeling a bit like hexing that cow off the top of the school, though."

"I'm impressed, Potter." Pansy said. "Never thought you had it in you to rant at a teacher like that."

"Frogspawn was calling *me* a liar when she and Fudge and most of the Ministry is saying Voldemort isn't back. That was *rich*, kids. Rich. I wasn't going to just sit there." Harry stated.

"*Going to tell them?*" Asked Boris.

"Ah yes. Thanks for reminding me." Harry said. "I'm going to be doing a little... well, let's call it a test. I've not got anything but an outline for it yet. But if I succeed, I'll be able to go back to class. Not only go back, but do so in a way that's sure to infuriate the giant frog."

"We adore plans." George said. "Let's discuss it, shall we?"

"Yes, let's!" Fred agreed.

"Oh no you don't. I'm keeping this one under wraps. At least for the time being. Got some people I need to talk to first." Harry said, smirking faintly. "Anyway, could you guys. I dunno, bugger off for the afternoon or something? I don't mean to be rude, but I need some

quiet time to think this out. Plus I need to get those books from Grimmauld Place up in here."

"Gonna be alright?" Tonks asked, leaning in to kiss Harry's forehead.

"I'll be fine. Might have a headache by evening, though." Harry murmured. "Here, I'll give you lot a mission - you can return after you successfully perform a dozen items on The List. I assume you two have been adding to it since we gave it to you?"

"Indeed we have." Fred said.

"Sounds like playtime to me." George added.

"One condition!" Harry said. "You can't get caught. Nothing can trace back to you. It'll add a bit of fun to the mix."

"Intriguing." Said the twins in unison.

"Then off we go! Malfoy, here we come!" Cried Fred as he and George practically charged from the room.

Sputtering, Pansy stood up and ran after them. "You leave Draco alone, dammit!"

"The rest of you? Go off and make sure that lot doesn't kill each other or anything?" Harry asked.

"Aye-aye, captain!" Tonks said, saluting. "...You really gonna be okay?"

"Nymmy, if this stupid plan of mine works, I'll officially be *better* than okay. I just need to finish hammering out the details."

Once everyone had left, Harry sighed quietly. "I hope we're doing the right thing, Boris."

"It will help you, Harry. We both know that."

"Yes... but will it *change* me?"

"We shall see."

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The next day was when Harry found out when his first detention with Umbridge was. He had found it strange that he *hadn't* heard anything yet. But when he was told when it would be, he realized why. That horrible woman had set it up so that all of his detentions would coincide with Ravenclaw's Quidditch practices. Needless to say, this left Harry in a furious mood. The team wasn't very happy either, and got into a huge fight with Harry during lunch. The news had spread by then.

Thankfully, Harry had Charms that afternoon. And Flitwick was usually good about picking up on when his students weren't in a good mood. Of course, word had also gotten back to him about Harry's detention and what it meant for his House's team. He asked Harry to stay behind after class was over with to have a word with him. Harry assumed that Flitwick was going to scold him for yelling with a teacher. It was, after all, not a very brainy-type thing to do.

"Harry," Flitwick began, crossing the room to sit next to Harry. "I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you to stay..."

"Actually, I figured it had to do with Umbridge."

"*Professor* Umbridge. And yes, it does. But... not for the reasons I believe you think."

"Sir?"

Flitwick lifted his head for a moment, his brow creased. "...Harry, you're one of the smartest students in Hogwarts right now. You've a capacity for learning that I've rarely seen. And you're easily one of the better players Ravenclaw House has seen on her team in years. Now I'm sure you're thinking I'm going to get onto you for verbally attacking a professor. And while I will say that it wasn't your crowning achievement, I will say this: I'm not disappointed in you."

Harry frowned. "Sir? What do you mean?"

"None of us want her here, you know." Flitwick said, looking up at Harry and smiling crookedly. "The Minister came two weeks before

the term was to start, bringing that... that awful woman with him! He prattled on for ages about how he thinks Hogwarts' standards aren't up to par, so to speak. He said that he *insisted* on having a Ministry-approved official as a teacher. Someone that would also be able to keep tabs on the other professors and, yes, Dumbledore himself."

"Yeah, I've... I've kinda figured out she was here for that kinda thing." Harry said. "I'm surprised you're being so frank with me about this, though."

"Yes, well, I know you've normally got your head about you, Harry. And, as I've said, you're one of my top students. I trust you not to spread this knowledge about. Oh, I'm sure you'll tell your friends and that's perfectly fine. But Harry, the point I want to make is this - you need to be careful." Flitwick said, choosing his words carefully. "Dolores Umbridge is here in what the rest of us have decided is a clear attempt to wrangle control of the school away from Albus Dumbledore."

Harry just nodded. He had come to the same conclusion, but it was somewhat disturbing to actually be told outright that it was what was going on. He hated being right sometimes.

"If Dolores finds any aspect of the school 'inappropriate,' she's to report back to the Minister at once. This goes for pretty much everything, Harry. I'm not exactly sure what the Ministry has planned, but I know we're on thin ice. I know you don't like her Harry - I don't either. I think Albus hates her the most, though he'll never admit it. He's not the type to claim hatred. What I'm saying--"

"...Is that I should watch what I say. Yeah. I'm sorry. It's just... I dunno. She rubbed me the wrong way. Don't worry, sir. I won't give her the satisfaction of that again. In fact, I was actually thinking about a way to ensure she can't rile me up again." Harry explained.

"Oh? And what plan is that?" Asked Flitwick.

Harry glanced back towards the door to the room. "Um..."

Flitwick blinked. Turning to look at what Harry was, he gave a smile, drew his wand, and spelled the entire wall. "If it was privacy you wanted, consider it done. Will you tell me what you have planned?"

"Does the information leave this room?" Asked Harry.

"That depends on what the information is." Flitwick replied. "Clearly, I'll have to tell Albus if you're planning something potentially dangerous."

"Nothing as such, no. Okay, I'll tell you. It's been driving me crazy, anyway. It'll be nice to get it out in the open. Hopefully you'll be able to give me your opinion on how I go about it..." Harry said.

"This is going to take awhile, isn't it?" Flitwick asked, another crooked smile on his face.

"Probably."

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"There! All done! What do you think?"

Tonks peered over the back of the couch, snorting when she saw Harry's handiwork. He had just finished transfiguring some more book shelves to hold all the things he had nicked from the Black Family library. There were now four new shelves around the room, each of them mostly filled up.

"I think you're completely off your nut for taking so many." Tonks said, facing forward again to continue glancing through her Herbology book. "Damn it, what page did that old bat say...?"

"Homework problems?" Harry asked, walking over.

"You could say that. Professor Sprout is completely barking, you know." Tonks muttered.

"Poor Nymmy." Harry said.

"Poor Nymmy." Tonks agreed. She then smacked Harry in the arm.

"So where were you this afternoon? How long'd Flitwick keep you, anyway?" Asked Tonks.

"Oh, uh... I was in there about an hour after class." Harry said, smiling sheepishly. "I ran my plan past him. Got some good advice, too."

"You plan on telling *me* what your plan is?" Tonks asked.

"I really should." Harry said, sitting down on the couch. "But I'd prefer it if Leon were here, too. The rest don't need to know."

"Really? Not even the twins?"

"Not even the twins. They're gonna have to find somewhere else to experiment for a bit." Harry said. "Gonna be using the training room for something."

Tonks closed her book, setting it to one side and scooting closer to Harry. "Whatcha gonna use it for, then? Come on, tell me. I'll tell Leon if you want."

"*Tell her.*" Hissed Boris lazily.

"*You be quiet.*" Hissed Harry in reply. Then, in English, he turned back to Tonks and said, "Look, it's nothing. Gonna miss classes for a week, though."

"A week? ...Okay, so you're gonna be doing *something* for a week and you'll need the training room for it. Since you said Fred and George would need to find somewhere else to experiment, it means you're probably going to be locked in, right?"

"Right in one, Nym. Would you care to continue your disturbingly good detective work?" Harry asked, looking highly amused.

"Indeed I would! Since this plan came about after your outburst in the frog lady's class, I can assume it has something to do with either making sure you don't tell her off again or, y'know, killing her. And since you don't kill, it's gotta be the former." Tonks said.

"Very good." Harry said, leaning in to kiss the girl. "When, exactly, did you become so calculating?"

"When I started hanging out with you, you jackass." Tonks said, smirking. "So what're you gonna be doing in there for a week?"

"Occlumency training." Harry said. "I've got everything worked out. I've talked to Dobby and he's agreed to bring me two meals a day. I'll exit once a day for a bath, but that's it. We're going to be sleeping solo for a week, I'm afraid."

"Awww! That's no fair!" Tonks whined. "Can't you come to bed in the actual bedroom? Why do you have to stay in there for that?"

"Because you, my dear Nymmy, are very distracting." Harry said, poking Tonks' nose lightly. "And I'm going to be working almost around the clock. I'm going to be completely bloody exhausted by the end of it. Professor Flitwick said he would speak to the rest of staff, save for Umbridge. Not sure what he's got planned, though. Probably saying I'm off visiting a sick relative or something. Which is a fine enough story given not many people really know that the Dursleys are a complete waste of oxygen."

"I'm surprised he's helping you out like that." Tonks said.

"So was I, to be perfectly honest. But he and the rest of the staff hate that woman as much as I do. If I can keep my emotions in check, I can keep her from reporting anything bad to the Ministry. The last thing I need is the Prophet to run a headline saying I've attacked a teacher or something." Harry said, shaking his head slowly.

"So when do you start? Tomorrow?"

"That's the plan." Harry said, nodding. "Me and Boris will go in and basically seal ourselves away for seven days."

"Do you think you'll get anywhere in your training?"

"I think it's worth the shot." Harry said. "The homework when it's over will suck, but I should be able to finish it off quick enough. I have to

do this now, before the work loads start to increase. There's no way in hell I could try this if the O.W.L. stuff starts to get here."

"So tonight's the last night I get to snuggle with you for a week?" Tonks asked, bottom lip jutting out.

"No pouting. Cute girls should never have a reason to pout." Harry said, slipping an arm around Tonks' shoulders and pulling her into a hug. "If this works, I'll also be much, much, *much* less stressed out. About *everything*."

Leaning into the hug, Tonks sighed. "Yeah, I know. I'll trust your judgment on this one. But it doesn't mean I have to like it. What'm I going to curl up with?"

"A good book." Harry stated firmly. "...OW! Okay, I deserved that one."

Sticking her tongue out, Tonks then rested her head on Harry's shoulder. "Do you want me to just tell Leon, then? So you can get an early start to it?"

"Would you? So hard to tell when he'll stop in these days." Harry said.

"Yeah. Luna's keeping him busy." Tonks said, amusement in her voice. "Can't imagine how."

"I don't think I want to see what the Nest looks like these days." Harry deadpanned.

"I agree with you entirely." Tonks said, nodding quickly. "...I'm glad she's so loyal to him, though. He's not exactly the easiest guy to warm up to."

"I'm just glad she didn't have a fit when she found out he was a vampire." Harry said. "It... I dunno. I'm just glad he knows he has someone there for him like you're there for me. You know? After all the crap he's been through, he deserves some happiness too."

"I just hope that little bitch from the Vatican keeps well clear of him." Tonks growled.

"Yeah. If she ever tries to hurt him, she's going to have the lot of us attacking her at once. Surely she knows that." Harry said. "Have you seen her glancing at Leon any so far?"

"Not yet. She's just been chatting it up with her little Gryffindor friends so far."

"Let's hope it stays that way."

"Yeah. Hey, Harry?"

"Hm?"

"Can we go to bed a little early tonight?"

Harry tilted his head. "What for?"

"Last night together for a week." Tonks murmured.

"You're acting like we'll never see each other again."

"A week's a long time when you're waiting."

"I suppose so. Hey, look at it this way! You can always hop in the tub with m-- YOWCH!"

"Jerk." Tonks giggled, hopping to her feet.

"I didn't deserve that one! Come here, dammit!" Harry said, giving Tonks the evil eye and getting up as well.

"Nope! Gonna hafta catch me!" Tonks said, running towards the back of the room.

"Accio Nymmy." Harry said dryly, aiming his wand at Tonks as he rounded the side of the couch.

Tonks let out an indignant squeak as she was pulled back across the room and into Harry's arms. He smirked as she arrived. "I believe I have caught you."

"Cheater." Tonks said, crossing her arms.

"You laid out no ground rules. It was a perfectly viable method of catching you." Harry replied, twirling his wand lazily.

"I'll ground rule *you*." Tonks said, returning the evil eye.

"You'll ground rule me? What does that even *mean*?" Harry asked.

"It means... that I still remember you're ticklish!" Tonks said, launching herself at Harry, who quickly found himself pinned to the floor and laughing.

"Unfair!" Harry howled, trying to grab at Tonks' hands as she tickled him. "Gah, not my stomach!"

"Submit!" Tonks crowed, her hands stopping.

"Never!" Harry roared.

"Have it your way!" Tonks said, resuming her tickling.

"Noooo! Boris, help!"

"*What do you want ME to do?*" Boris asked, looking over in amusement. "*Help yourself.*"

"Ahhhh, damn you all!"

Chapter 10 – The Seal

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too."

"It's gonna be lonely sleeping by myself again."

"At least you're going to have a bed."

"Well..."

"No."

"Aw c'mon..."

"Sorry."

"C'mooooon!"

"Nymmy..."

"Harry, c'mon. How is sleeping distracting?"

"Have you seen your legs?"

"Harry."

"Okay, okay. Sorry. But seriously. I need to get going."

"Yes, please do. You're going to make the rest of us vomit if you keep this up." Came the bored voice of Pansy Parkinson. "Get going or shut up and sit back on the couch, Potter."

"Aw, but they're having a *moment*!" Fred cooed.

"They're going to be apart a whole *week*, Parkinson!" George added.

"That's like an eternity for a pair of lovebirds."

"We can do without the commentary." Harry said, his voice dry.

Harry had gathered his friends together in the Pit to tell them of his decision. Everyone thought the idea was fine, though the twins were still sad they wouldn't get to hear Harry dressing down Umbridge again. Harry had been saying his goodbyes to Tonks for almost ten minutes while everyone else watched on in varying degrees of amusement or annoyance.

"I'm just saying. Let's throw him into the room and haul her outta here." Pansy said, shrugging. "Otherwise this is never going to get off the ground."

"As much as I hate to agree with her, she's right." Solieyu said. "You should get in there and get to work, Harry."

"Yeah, I know." Harry said, making a face. "Okay, let's go over it once more, yeah? I dunno if the frogspawn is a Legilimens or not, but never have eye contact. At least for this week, okay?"

"I'm still amazed Flitwick managed to convince the other members of staff to cover for you." Tonks stated.

"Yeah, me too. How he convinced Snape is beyond me. I think he hates Umbridge more than he hates me." Harry said. "...Gotta say, I'm not feeling a whole lot different. If I had to choose one of their sides in a battle, I'd easily choose to side with Snape."

"You realize, of course, that I'm going to grill you about your experience once you emerge, don't you?" Asked Hermione.

"Naturally." Harry said, glancing her way. "Terribly sorry you can't sit in and take notes."

"Horrifying as it is to say, I've actually got enough on my plate for a change." Hermione said. "I've been looking ahead at the kinds of things we'll be going over for our O.W.L.s and while it's fascinating, it's also ridiculously past where we should be."

"Where most of us should be, you mean." Ginny said. "You and Harry are, shall we say, a bit smarter than the rest of us."

"Oh, don't be silly." Hermione said.

"You've memorized most of it already." Harry stated, smirking at Hermione, who blushed.

"I haven't." She said.

"Ninety percent?" Harry asked.

"Eighty-five. Roughly. Shut up." Hermione mumbled, blushing further.

"Damn. You're ahead of me by like thirty. I blame the frogspawn and my need to go through with this." Harry said. "Anyway, yes. I need to get going. Nymmy, try not to drive our friends out of their minds in my absence, please."

"I'll try." Tonks pouted.

The two kissed and, after lingering for a bit longer, Harry pulled away from the girl and headed into the training room. He closed the door behind him and promptly spelled it to remain that way. Next, he warded the room so that no outside noise got in. This also helped to ensure no noise inside broke *out*. He wasn't sure what Boris had planned, but if it involved Harry crying out in any way for any reason, he didn't want anyone in the Pit to barge in. He had to buckle down and concentrate on his goal.

He had to seal away his emotions. His emotions and most everything else, really. He didn't want anyone looking into his mind for things to use against him. And now that he knew Dumbledore could jump into his head, he really didn't want *him* doing so either. Not that he didn't trust Dumbledore. They had their arguments and differences, but Dumbledore was still an amazing man. Completely off his nut, but amazing.

Boris, who had been curled around Harry's neck, finally started to speak again. He had been silent for the whole storytelling bit and Harry saying goodbye. "*That took awhile.*"

"Sorry. He was right, though. This is going to feel like an eternity to me." Harry said, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "So... what are we going to do? I mean... no offense, Boris, but you're a snake. How

exactly are you going to teach me the inner workings of complex mental magic?"

"*Repitition?*" Suggested the taipan.

"Yeah, because drilling something into *my* head's gonna work." Harry scoffed.

"Point. Seriously? I'm basically just going to go over everything Master Whitechapel told me. The man was out of his mind by the point he told me his secrets. He too was a Parselmouth and told me a great many things, most of which I could've gone my whole life without wanting to know. It seems, at the very least, that some of his teachings will be useful again. I'm not entirely sure how well you'll take to the methods he spoke to me of, but knowing you? I'm sure it won't even take the entire week before you're capable of blocking someone out."

"Which brings up the point of where I'm going to get a subject capable of testing me. Do you think Dumbledore would run a scan and check?" Asked Harry.

"Quite possibly. He seemed impressed back at your relatives' house, anyway. Imagine how he'll look if you manage to keep him out entirely." Boris said.

"This is true." Harry said, smiling. "Okay, so... talk to me, Boris. What do I need to do?"

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Tonks sighed, watching the door close behind Harry. Shoulders slumped, she walked back over to the couch and flopped down on it. Luna, who had been staring at the fire for most of Harry and Tonks' goodbye speech, put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"You'll both be fine." Said the blonde softly. "He's strong and you're stubborn. You'll find some way to kill time."

"Yeah, I know. And I know I'll see him at least *once* a day. But still. I don't like being apart from him. It just seems like every time we're

apart, something bad happens to him." Tonks said, sighing. "I'm actually kinda wishing the O.W.L. stuff was happening now, just so I'd be too busy to think about it too much."

Solieyu leaned over the back of the couch. "I'm sure Hermione could set you up with her studying regiment..."

"No! No. No no no." Tonks said, eyes wide. "Uh... no offense or anything, Hermione."

"None taken. I know perfectly well how ridiculous my schedule can be sometimes." Hermione said. "Tell you what, though. I can come by and help you on your homework in the evenings."

"I'm sure Luna and I could, too." Ginny said. "Only I think we'd be asking more questions than providing more answers..."

"And if Luna's here, Leon'll be here." Fred said, waggling his eyebrows at the vampire, who scowled in response.

"The two of *us*, however, have lost our laboratory!" George lamented, clutching his chest. "So we will have to seek out another place to fiddle with ingredient combinations!"

"And, as I have no deep ties to anyone, I'll be keeping to myself as well." Pansy stated. "Let me know when Potter comes out, though. I'd love to see what this Occlumency stuff does to him over the course of a week."

"Speaking of deep ties. Have you talked to Malfoy?" Asked Ginny.

"I have." Pansy said. "He... has been acting odd, though."

"Even for Malfoy?" Asked George.

Rolling her eyes, Pansy blandly replied, "Yes, even for Malfoy. As I was saying - he's acting really odd. Crabbe and Goyle are staying away from him and keep sending him these death glares whenever they're in the same room together. I dunno if Draco dismissed them from guard duty or insulted their heritages or what, but they hate him now. The only people Draco has talked to this year are me and Blaise.

And I've talked to Blaise - he said Draco isn't being as open and talkative as he normally is. So even around *us*, the two people he actually considered to be true friends, he isn't saying a lot."

"And that's very bothersome." Fred said. "When Malfoy is quiet, something bad's certain to happen."

"I think he's considering what happened over the summer. He told me - all of us - what Potter said to him on the train ride home last year. He came back positively fuming about it, in fact." Pansy said, brushing some rogue hairs away from her eyes.

"We deduced he was sitting alone on the way here this year." Solieyu said, glancing across the room. "How correct were we?"

"Incredibly. Draco didn't want anyone in his compartment for some reason." Pansy said, letting her head thump against the back of the chair she was in. "He's never told us why, either. As far as I knew, no one else was in there with him the whole trip. What did he do, though? Sit and talk to himself? Think? If so, what *about*?"

"Harry's words must have been sinking in. Harry was right and Malfoy couldn't deny it anymore. His world was basically rocked at the foundation level and he's having some kind of existential crisis. He thought working for Voldemort would be something to be proud of. Instead, he saw his parents bowing before him. He was hit with the Cruciatus Curse for trying to keep his head high. He found out that no one has honor before the Dark Lord. If I were him, I know I'd be rethinking my stance on things." Solieyu said.

"I wish he'd talk to me." Pansy said, staring down at her lap. "...I think I'm going to go try again. Excuse me."

With that, Pansy Parkinson quickly slipped out of the Pit. Tonks let out a bitter chuckle once she'd left.

"We're both having boy problems. Mine's locked himself away willingly. Hers is torturing himself because he's too stupid to play for the winning team." Tonks muttered.

"Now now. No thinking like that." Said Fred. "George, do you think our friends here would enjoy a demonstration on a few things we've been working on?"

"Oh, I've no doubt they would!" George exclaimed, reaching into his robes and pulling out a small box. Opening it up, he pulled out a small, two-toned piece of candy. An absolutely feral grin crossed over his face.

"We're going to be cleaning some kind of fluid up, aren't we?" Hermione whispered to Ginny.

"If we're lucky, it'll only be blood." Ginny whispered back.

"...And if we aren't?"

"...Don't ask."

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"Two years before his death, Master Whitechapel started confiding in me. I had been in his service, shall we say, for over twenty-five years by then. Despite this, rarely did I ever bear witness to the horrors he committed. Those I did see still remain with me all these years later. As I said, he was a Parselmouth. He spoke to me in my own language, explaining why he did the things he did. He was completely insane, Harry. The only reason I remain alive is because he was planning to use me once he got found out. Through his madness, he knew it would happen one day.

"In this way, he would be able to pass along his teachings while keeping them secret from almost everyone else. You can't extract memories from an animal like you can a human. It meant that unless another Parselmouth just happened to be working for the authorities, his secrets would remain just that. And since Parselmouths are considered to be intrinsically evil, no proper magical law enforcement agency would hire one.

"However, despite knowing that I was a snake and therefore mostly safe in regards to holding his secrets, he still taught me of Occlumency and Legilimency. Master Whitechapel, in addition to

being insane, was horribly paranoid. He wanted to ensure that no matter what happened, I wouldn't be able of revealing his secrets to anyone unless I chose to do so of my own free will.

"Strange as it might seem, this time with him was almost therapeutic. It was so relaxing the way he taught me. It's the single positive thing that came out of his lab. I don't think he planned on me teaching Occlumency to another Parselmouth half a world away many years in the future. It's just as well that he didn't. His spells on me that have kept me alive this long would've been removed. I never would have met you. But I'm getting off topic and, for that, I apologize. This isn't going to be painful, Harry, but it WILL be tiring and irritatingly long. Truly mastering Occlumency is difficult. It took almost two months of his teachings before I was able to keep him out of my mind. And, as he considered himself the most powerful wizard on the planet, he assumed that if HE couldn't break in, no one else could either."

Harry nodded slowly as Boris told his story. And, once finished, Harry let out a sigh. "I'm going to need to take another week off to recover from this one, aren't I?"

"It's entirely possible, Harry." Boris replied. "This is going to wear us both down. We're going to wind up fighting and being generally irritable. We're going to break this training down into two parts. The first three days we'll work on clearing and sorting your mind. Only then will I attempt to break in. When you can keep me out, you'll be done. You'll be better trained this way than if you were to train with a wizard."

"Why's that?" Asked Harry.

"Because your training would begin, most likely, with an attempt to break into your mind right off the bat. To test for potential innate ability. I won't be doing this. I know you've made progress due to the meditation over the summer, but I don't feel right in trying to enter now. It would be too easy still. Your mind is still cluttered. Think of your mind as your bedroom. You wouldn't leave things laying about there, would you? Anyone who walked in would be able to look around at whatever was out. You want to have your 'room' clean, so

to speak, so that the only thing someone sees is what you WANT them to see." Boris explained.

"Makes sense. I kept trying to sort my thoughts back at the Dursleys. I guess I succeeded to some extent since I cooled off during that fight with Vernon." Harry said, leaning back on his hands. "So where do I start?"

"You start at the beginning, of course." Boris said. "The first exercise is merely being able to picture the things within your mind. Only once you know what's there can you begin to sort and put away the things you don't want out. Put them behind doors, in chests, anything you'd like to envision so long as the thoughts and memories and emotions aren't out in the open. Store them away in a place that only you have access to. Allow them out only when YOU feel the need to. Your mind is in disorder at the moment. Once you're capable of working out how all of the things in your mind feel, you can start to put them in their own, separate piles. Memories in one, emotions in another, and so on. After you do this, you begin to tuck them away behind whatever form of barrier you want."

"Hermione would be soaking this in." Harry muttered. "Okay, let's get down to business then, Boris. Time's wasting."

"As you wish. Sit up straight. ...That's it. Now, close your eyes and begin taking slow, deep breaths. You need to relax, Harry. I don't need to peek into your head to know that you're still nervous about this." Boris hissed softly.

"Can't help it. I'm only human." Harry said, letting his eyes slip shut as he cracked a grin.

The taipan's tongue flickered out a few times and a sort of snakelike grin spread across his face. *"We'll see if you still make that claim by week's end."*

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The first day, Harry didn't think the training was that bad. If nothing else, he wound up being more relaxed than he had in weeks. He was starting to get the hang of making mental images for each type of

thing that was bouncing around his head. He pictures memories as wizarding photographs, each one surrounded in a frame of varying elegance depending on the memory it contained. The night he had confessed to Tonks at the Yule Ball, for instance, was held within the biggest, most elaborate frame he could think of. On the other hand, the night that Dobby had entered Number Four before the start of his Second Year at Hogwarts was held within a tattered, cracked frame that looked to be seconds from falling apart.

Emotions, on the other hand, were simpler. Boris had suggested he use colors to determine those, as it was the easiest way to sort through them. Sure enough, Harry had rounded up a few emotions by the first day's end. His calm was a soothing green color in a spherical shape. He also managed to find his anger. It was spiked on all sides and pulsating a deep crimson.

His thoughts and other miscellaneous things were still up in the air. Harry figured it would be easy to keep track of recent thoughts, but found them to be the hardest. By the time he was ready to go to bed, Harry had two or three thoughts as the base of what might become a towering pile of them. He was annoyed with himself for being unable to properly contain them.

Boris suggested, more than once, that Harry use jars and vials to contain his thoughts, making some sort of bizarre potion's shelf of them all. Harry had deemed this to be ridiculous, figuring that if Snape could read his thoughts, the Potion Master would end up laughing himself into a coma. Boris had argued that, if Harry successfully mastered Occlumency, Snape wouldn't be able to *get* to his thoughts. Harry had relented in the end, bottling the few thoughts he had come across in wide jars, as though they were moths.

Boris hadn't been kidding, either. It was tiresome work. Harry was physically drained by the time midnight rolled around. After transfiguring one of the practice dummies into a bedroll, Harry was asleep in a matter of minutes. Boris watched as Harry drifted off, wondering how well Harry would do in the long run. Occlumency could do strange things to a person, especially if that person was obsessive about keeping others out of his head. Being in control of one's self was perfectly fine. But Jaeger Whitechapel hadn't been in

control of himself to begin with. Boris often heard his former master muttering to himself as he flopped about in bed. Whitechapel thought everyone and everything could look into his mind and kept reworking how to store things within it. With each revision, the man slipped a bit further into madness.

By the time of his death, Boris guessed that his master had gone through hundreds of revisions to his mental filing system. How he hadn't turned into some kind of gibbering mess was beyond the taipan's explanation.

Boris woke Harry at six in the morning the next day, minutes before Dobby brought up a large breakfast (as well as some well-cooked pork for Boris). Harry wolfed down his food at such a quick rate, Boris feared he might choke at some point. But neither student nor teacher choked on their meals, despite the taipan also finding himself eating quickly. It took the snake a little longer than Harry would have liked to digest to the point where he didn't feel sick moving around, but he forgave him. Boris would only be eating twice over the week, despite needing an almost equal amount of energy to Harry.

That day's training went as smoothly as it could, with Harry choosing to work more on his memories and emotions than his thoughts, leaving them for last. Boris allowed this, as he knew how difficult thoughts were to wrangle. And, once the boy's other issues were kept under lock and key, it would be easier to focus on what remained.

Harry amazed Boris in how fast he was able to pick up and alter techniques the snake was passing along. Boris suggested Harry put his 'pictures' somewhere. Harry told him that he created a room, not unlike the Pit in its design, where his memories hung on the walls. When Boris suggested something simpler to contain his emotions, Harry decided on lockets. Each one could be opened or shut at will, allowing Harry to turn on and off his emotions as he saw fit.

It was progressing much faster than Boris had expected, which was good. The more time before the third day ended, the better prepared Harry would be. He would have time to secure his barriers better. Boris had no doubt that Harry would be able to keep him out to some extent upon his first attempt in.

When 7PM rolled around that night, Dobby brought another meal in. Harry once more wolfed down the food brought for him, keeling over backwards and sprawling out after he was finished. It wasn't good to work constantly, and Boris knew this. They took short breaks every hour. In addition, they had decided that after Harry ate dinner, he and Boris would discuss the day's progress. Once Harry had digested, he would leave the training room for a bath and return between thirty and forty-five minutes later. After that, it was reviewing the day's lessons again and practicing further until midnight.

Apparently, no one had been in the Pit when Harry let himself out to bathe that night. The taipan felt this was for the better. Harry didn't need distractions this early into the game. And Tonks, sweet and well-meaning as she was, was a massive distraction. Harry still hadn't gotten his mind into order. Seeing the girl could very well throw off everything he had accomplished so far.

By midnight, Harry was quite confident in being able to keep both his memories and his emotions locked up. When Harry was asked how he planned to keep the emotion-sealing lockets safe, he replied that each one had a type of lock on it. One that couldn't be broken open without the proper thought. His anger, for instance, would be kept within its blood-red locket until Harry thought about the Ministry of Magic's idiocy and unwillingness to believe that Voldemort had returned. When asked how he planned to repress this thought given the current situation, Harry had merely shrugged and stated that his thoughts were kept hidden under a trap door, in bottles and vials, in shelves that lined the walls of the room he had thought up.

The storage area for his memories, Harry had stated, now looked more like a museum than the Pit. Boris approved of this as well, though he wasn't sure how well the locks on either of these doors would hold. Harry hadn't mentioned how he planned to keep his thoughts locked up. Boris assumed there was a system being dreamed up, however, and left the issue alone.

On the third day, Harry was mostly left to his own devices in order to set his barriers up more properly in preparation for the impending second half of their training together. Harry got his first proper test when he went to take his bath that evening. Boris heard a commotion

outside when Harry left. Upon his return, Harry told the taipan of what had been going on.

The twins, in their wisdom, had taken over the dining room as their new experiment testing grounds. This didn't sit well with anyone else, who often stayed for at least one meal per day. Harry said he had merely raised a hand in greeting as he headed into the bathroom. When he left, the twins had gone and only Tonks, Solieyu, and Luna remained. He had given them a smile, not answered any of their questions, and slipped back into the training room.

Boris was impressed. To brush off chaos and then a feeling of warmth so easily, he had clearly progressed. The question was how far he had. Not rising to meet the cacophony that Fred and George Weasley had caused was one thing. But not going to sit and talk with your closest friends in front of a warm fireplace after three grueling days of almost constant mental training? Harry was committed, if nothing else.

The remainder of the night was spent in meditation for Harry. Boris had noticed a change in the boy's scent late the previous day. He wasn't sure what it meant yet, however, and didn't bring the matter up. By the time midnight rolled around and Harry slipped off to dreams, Boris had a good idea of what it was. It wasn't a simple thing to bring up, either. Harry had matured in some way over the previous handful of days. This was a good sign to the taipan. It meant that Harry was coming to terms with things he had locked away. Painful memories. Unwanted thoughts. Rampaging emotions. Harry had done his best to collect these things and sort them. They were still there, still hurtful in their own ways. The only difference was that now Harry was able to look at them, accept that they were there, and not break down in some capacity.

Harry didn't eat breakfast the following day. He wanted Boris to immediately attempt to break into his mind the moment he had brushed away his grogginess. Boris had suggested Harry hold off until after he had eaten, but Harry insisted. When Dobby came, Harry apologized for not eating, asking the eager house elf if he could instead have a large dinner. Dobby had, of course, readily agreed. The fact that Harry was even able to speak to that uppity little

creature was amazing to Boris, who found the house elf to be quite irritating.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Boris asked.

"I'm positive. I can't grow if you baby me. Let's begin." Harry said.

"Very well. I'll count down from three and then say 'go.' On 'go' I will attempt to break into your mind. You'll need to learn how to not only hold your barriers but also how to recognize the intrusion as well as how to force me out again." Boris explained. *"I'll go easy on you the first time. I'll watch to see how you do certain things and, once I have a feeling for your methods, I'll back out. I won't choose any painful things, nor will I tamper with your emotions."*

"I'm ready." Harry said.

"We shall see."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Seven days had passed. Seven long, depressing, and thoroughly boring days. Tonks had found herself horribly upset the first night Harry had passed through on his way to and from the bathroom. He barely acknowledged anyone on either trip. She had looked at him hopefully as he walked back towards the training room that day, but he had merely smiled at them and sealed himself up again. That was the last time he even did that much. Every day following that, he paid less and less attention to things that had gone on around him. The sixth day, he had seemed annoyed about something or another, but his fuming was silent and withdrawn. When he headed back from his bath, he had replaced his look of annoyance with one of absolute indifference.

Everyone was gathered in the Pit. Harry would be leaving his self-made tomb within the next few minutes, if his schedule was any indication. Everyone was on their feet. The twins were off near the dining room door, occasionally peering in to check on something or another that was brewing inside. They wouldn't say what it was.

Pansy was in her usual spot in one of the back corners, idly glancing through a book that Tonks recognized as being one of Sirius'. Ginny and Hermione were also in one of the back corners of the room, but they were in a quiet argument over the contents of some of the things Harry had brought from Grimmauld Place. Solieyu and Luna were leaning back against the couch and were satisfied with merely watching the training room door.

Tonks was standing directly out from it, however. Whatever plans Harry had for himself for the rest of the night, he *would* acknowledge that she was there, dammit all!

Harry's entrance came without fanfare or even any greetings. He looked tired. Hideously so. He had noticeable, dark bags under his eyes and walked with his shoulders slumped. It was a vast change from how he had looked the previous day. He stopped when he saw Tonks standing there, not ten feet away. His eyebrows raised slightly and, as though he had forgotten, only then did he look around the room. His eyes slipped shut after taking in that everyone was there. Straightening himself up, he smiled faintly as his eyes opened once more.

"Hello, Nym." He murmured, opening his arms.

Tonks ran over and threw hers around him, burying his face against his shoulder.

"Hey, hey... it's only been a week." Harry whispered into her hair, his arms closing around her. "What's wrong?"

"Missed you." Came Tonks' quiet voice.

"You saw me almost every night." Harry said.

"Not the same." Tonks mumbled.

Harry chuckled quietly. Glancing around at everyone again, his expression never changing, he asked, "What have we missed?"

"Not a lot. Flitwick apparently ran with the idea that you were off visiting a terminally sick relative of yours." Fred said. "Even Snape was going along for the ride."

"I'll have to thank him sometime." Harry said, glancing up thoughtfully.

The twins started to snicker, but stopped when they realized that Harry was being completely honest.

"Oh, that's an omen, that is." George said.

"Harry thinking of thanking Snape?" Fred said, looking at his brother.

"Why shouldn't I?" Asked Harry. "He didn't have to comply. In fact, I would have assumed that he would've taken great pleasure in ousting my plan to Umbridge. He didn't. That has to say something for the man's character."

"Merely that he hates her more than he does you." Ginny said.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps he merely plays the part of a jerk in order to help keep face in front of those from his House. Pansy?"

Pansy glanced up from her book. "If it's an act, then Snape is a fine actor."

"He was a Death Eater." Harry said, shrugging one shoulder. "And yet here he is, working in a school. Dumbledore trusts him. There must be a reason."

"Dumbledore does a lot of things." Hermione said. "Most of which, if you'll recall, you've had some kind of issue with."

"True. Ah, that reminds me though. I'm not quite done." Harry said. "Nym, let go for a sec, would you? I need to make a call."

"A call?" Tonks asked, letting go of Harry and taking a step back.

"Mm. Boris said I should have a final exam." Harry said, walking over to the fireplace.

"Where *is* Boris?" Asked Tonks.

"Sleeping around my right arm. He's exhausted. To be perfectly honest, so am I. Ever since yesterday afternoon, he laid into me pretty hard. He wasn't holding back on me." Harry said. And, taking a handful of Floo Powder from the pouch above the fireplace, he threw it into the dancing flames and said, "Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

A few moments later and the headmaster's head appeared in the fire. He glanced around before smiling at Harry. "Ah, Harry! Good to see you. Filius told me of your little plan. Have you finished your training?"

"That depends. Could you drop by and try breaking into my mind, sir? Boris did his best, but he wanted me to go up against another wizard. You're the only one I'm currently aware of who can do that."

"I'd be glad to, Harry. I've been wondering of your progress. Give me a moment and I'll be right here." Said Dumbledore.

Harry stepped back and, a few seconds later, Dumbledore came stepped out of the green flames that flared up. After cleansing the soot off of himself, he glanced down at Harry. Harry returned the look, his gaze unwavering.

"We can begin whenever you're ready." Dumbledore said.

"Any time is fine." Harry said. "Though, if you don't mind, I'd like you to do this twice. I'd like another opinion on the way I've done this. Though if you manage to get in the first time, it obviously won't be needed."

Dumbledore chuckled. "As you wish, Harry. I must say, I'm impressed with your resolve to learn Occlumency. I'm not entirely sure that skipping your classes was the best route to take, but if you can keep others out of your mind, a bit of homework won't mean anything in the long run. Voldemort himself is a very skilled Legilimens, at least on par with myself. If you are able of keeping me out, or even of keeping your memories away from my prying eyes, then you won't have to worry about him."

"One more request, sir, if I may?" Harry said.

"You may."

"Don't hold back."

Dumbledore bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment. And, as he lifted it, his eyes began to twinkle madly. To everyone else in the room, the two seemed to be finished with their exercise in under half a minute. To Harry and Dumbledore, however, it was a different story. The headmaster bore forward at full power, as he had been requested to do. He met with a surprisingly fierce resistance and more than one level of it. He broke through the first barrier with little effort. The second, however, held him up a bit longer. He didn't feel he broke through it so much as Harry allowed him in.

Dumbledore found himself looking at a small, square room with two exits - one in the floor and one directly ahead. Along either side wall were glass cases that held beautiful, colored locket. He stepped towards one of the lockets, feeling a sort of warmth coming off of it. Assuming it to hold either some form of emotion or a particularly pleasant emotion, the headmaster tried opening the case it was in. The case, however, would not move, though the door on the far end of the room clicked open of its own accord. Smiling, and thinking that Harry was trying to tell him something, Dumbledore walked towards and through the now-open door.

He was surprised to find himself in an utterly massive structure. It looked very much like a museum, though Dumbledore had never seen one quite so large before. After walking around a bit, glancing at the various memories in their photographs, he came across a small one in a simple, elegant frame. Bending over to glance at it, he couldn't help but smile. With one more look around, he headed back towards the small room he started in. Walking over to the glass case he had tried to open before, Dumbledore found himself able to lifting the glass now. The locket within was green and was still giving off warmth. It would not open, however. And this time, when the headmaster heard a noise, it was the trap door popping up.

With a chuckle, he went over to inspect the newly-opened room. After climbing down a rather long ladder, the headmaster found himself in a cave-like environment. There were countless shelves that seemed

to go on forever in either direction. Each one was crammed with small glass jars, bottles, and vials. Within each was a purple-blue mass that floated around. And again, Dumbledore was drawn towards one in particular. Knowing what it meant this time, he was quick to leave this place.

And, sure enough, the locket now opened for him. A green ball of light flew out and floated around him for awhile before returning to its place within the locket, which Dumbledore then closed.

It was only after he had set the locket back down that he was jarred as a sudden, powerful force slammed into him. Fight though he did, he was unable to keep himself from being pushed away from the room. Up he flew, past the second barrier and through a newly-reconstructed first barrier. The first seemed to shine as he passed by it.

Both Harry and Dumbledore blinked when the test was over with. Dumbledore put a hand on Harry's shoulder, beaming at him. "I am highly impressed. You have managed in a week what could take fully-grown men and women years to accomplish. I've not come across a defense system quite like that before, either. But I must ask - how do you keep the doors locked?"

"Doors?" Hermione asked.

"I can't say. Or, rather, I won't say. There's more in that room besides two doors and the lockets, though." Harry said, a sly grin on his face. "Maybe you just didn't notice it."

Dumbledore laughed at this. "Ahh, I see, I see. Well, Harry, I do believe that you have passed your test with flying colors. I felt that you let me in after I got through the initial barrier. And it was no coincidence that you pulled me towards the things I needed to open that locket. I admit to being caught off guard at the force of which you threw me from your mind."

"Boris caught that last night, too." Harry said. "He went prying where he shouldn't have."

"I see. Your snake is asleep, I take it."

"Yes, sir."

"When he wakes up, pass along a message from me. Tell him that he has done an outstanding job in teaching you Occlumency and that I give you full marks. I have no doubt in my mind that you will be able of keeping Voldemort out." Dumbledore said.

"Thank you, sir. I'll be sure to tell him. And thanks for stopping by." Harry said.

"Not at all, Harry. I always enjoy seeing my students grow and expand their knowledge. And now, I believe, you should relax. Do you really need to keep that up amongst friends?" Asked the headmaster, his voice very quiet.

"I can't build my stamina in regards to it otherwise." Harry said, his smile fading somewhat as he replied in an equally soft voice. "I give myself plenty of time to unwind, however. Don't worry. I haven't changed *that* much, sir."

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I see. Very well then, Harry. I shall leave you to your own devices. Remember not to push yourself too hard, however. Trying too hard oftentimes leaves one more vulnerable than if one wasn't trying at all."

"Boris said something similar." Harry said.

"Then I will not worry myself on the matter. Clearly, your snake has a good head about him. If you'll excuse me, Harry, I was in the middle of some very fine tea when you called."

Harry grinned. "Sorry for interrupting."

"Not at all, not at all." Dumbledore said, walking back towards the fireplace. The green flames jumped to life again as he stepped in and he was gone in a flash. Before the flames died down, he stuck his head back in and added, "Ah yes, I almost forgot. We have planned ahead, assuming your training would leave you quite tired. You are excused from classes tomorrow, if you so desire."

"I...really appreciate that, sir. I have a feeling I'll sleep half the day and spend the rest of it doing homework. But given what I went through, it'll be a cake walk. Thanks again for stopping by." Harry said.

Dumbledore merely smiled. And that was that. His head pulled out of the flames and the fire turned back to its normal color and size, crackling away as though it hadn't played host to magical teleportation.

"So..." Harry began, fishing Boris from up one of his sleeves and gingerly placing him atop the fireplace. "I know you all have questions - Hermione especially - but I ask you not ask until tomorrow."

"Aww." Hermione pouted.

"I really am tired, guys. So, while I appreciate everyone turning up to greet me, I think I'm going to head for bed. My back also wishes for this. I probably should have transfigured a better place to sleep. Fred, George, get that eldritch thing out of my dining room, please. You have your lab back for the time being." Harry said, shooting the twins a look.

"Aye, captain!" Replied the twins in unison, saluting Harry.

Rolling his eyes, Harry turned and headed towards the bedroom door. "Nym?"

"I'll be in in a minute." Tonks said, smiling as Harry nodded and vanished into the bedroom. When the door was closed, she looked around the room.

"He seemed... different." Ginny said, her voice low.

"After what I put him through, he better." Hissed Boris in a groggy voice.

Ginny turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Said Boris, turning his head to look at the redhead. *"That I damn near destroyed his mind yesterday. I put him through hell. He got complacent on me so I decided to show him what a real mental*

attack would be like. Not a simple training exercise, not the theory of it - the real thing. I dismantled his defenses and forced him to relive every nasty thing he'd gone through in the past few years. That made him sober up. After he got back from his bath that night, he was more serious again and finished without any further problems."

Ginny gaped at him. There were a few words she couldn't understand still, but she got the basic idea. "But... what if that had, y'know, *done* something to him?"

"What? What the hell are you two talking about?" Asked Tonks.

"Boris decided the best way for Harry to not get over confident in his own abilities was to fully attack Harry's mind. Didn't you say he looked mad about something when he was en route to the bathroom?" Ginny asked.

"Yeah, I did." Tonks said, turning to glare at the taipan. "You better not have caused him any lasting damage."

"Tell her not to worry. Harry's fine. But he needed a shot of reality. It helped to toughen his defenses up. I was just awake enough to listen in on his conversation with your headmaster. If he was capable of pushing that man out, then he's surpassed my training. And, as was noted, he seems different now. You're going to have to learn to accept that that's who he has to be. At least until Voldemort is taken care of." Boris said.

Ginny relayed what was being said to everyone else in the room. Tonks blew out a sigh and shook her head. "I think I'm gonna turn in early, too. Would you guys mind..."

"Of course." Said Hermione. "Go to him."

"Thanks. Oh, and Fred? George? I told you he'd make you move that thing." Tonks said, smirking as she headed for the bedroom.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

"Harry?"

"Nn?"

"Haaaaarryyyyyy?"

"G'way."

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaarryyyyyyyyyy..."

"Whaaaat?" Harry whined, cracking an eye open.

Tonks, in her nightshirt, grinned down at him. "You aren't allowed to fall asleep yet."

Harry whined again, lifting his head long enough to pull the pillow from underneath it and put it over his face. "Bugger off. M'sleepy."

"Yes, as am I. But you aren't going to get away with *not* holding me now that you're back, mister." Tonks said, poking Harry's chest.

Without moving the pillow, Harry opened his arms. Tonks grinned and lifted the pillow up. Harry groaned, raising his head long enough for her to stuff the pillow back under it. Arms wrapping around Tonks when she curled up against him, Harry whispered, "Sorry for all this."

"You had to. So no apologizing, okay? M'just glad to have you back." Tonks said, nestling her nose against Harry's neck.

"Kay." Harry murmured. "Nymmy?"

"Yeah?"

"Wasn't the only thing I was apologizing for."

"Oh?"

Harry's eyes opened slowly. "Yeah. Was apologizing for the way I'm gonna need to act in public now. When I'm alone with you... there's no need to keep that going. You're not going to betray me. At least I *hope* you aren't. Meaning the only time I can truly relax anymore is when I'm alone with you..."

"Sounds draining." Tonks said.

"Astoundingly so." Harry said. "You ever get a really bad sinus headache? One of the kind that sits behind your eye all day? Maybe drains down so your *jaw* hurts later? It's kind of like that. Only constantly. And letting all of that go and lowering my barriers is like taking fast-working medicine for it. There's still a faint buzz, but Boris warned me that there would be until I got used to it."

"You can't let your guard down around the others?" Asked Tonks.

"Can't. I need everyone to think I've changed somehow." Harry murmured. "I know that may sound strange, as why wouldn't I include you in that, right? Simply put, I refuse to. Boris said I should, but I won't. At least in this room, I can act like my old self again without having to worry that someone or something will come along looking for things they shouldn't. I can be myself around you and you alone, Nymmy."

"That... Are you sure? I don't want anything bad happening because you decided to lower your defenses in here..." Tonks said, tilting her head up slightly.

"I'm sure. He can't get me in here. No one can." Harry murmured, his hold on Tonks tightening for a moment. "And... I want to be able to let go of the headache at least for awhile every day. It would drive me crazy if I didn't."

Tonks nodded a little, kissing Harry crookedly on the chin. "Just be careful, alright? What's the plan for tomorrow?"

"Rest. Lots of rest. And lots of food." Harry said, grinning. "I'm both tired and hungry as hell."

"Cake?"

"Long as it isn't of the pan variety."

Swat.

"Kay, I deserved that."

"Yes. Yes you did. Okay, I've kept you awake long enough. Get some rest." Tonks said, snuggling up to Harry again.

"Mmm, sleep..." Harry murmured.

Chapter 11 – Dusk

Ugh... do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to."

"Can't I sleep in one more day?"

"Fraid not."

"Dammit."

Harry pulled the covers away from his face and sat up, glaring down at the bed he was in. "Oh, why can't I build a bed that travels around *with* me?"

"It's called a sleeping bag." Tonks said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and slipping her shoes on. "And I think it'd be pretty creepy if you just laid down and took a nap on the Ravenclaw table or something."

"The twins would make me regret it." Harry said. "Okay, let's see how quick I can raise my defenses today."

Harry had spent his extra day off lounging around in bed, mostly. He had gone into the main room as soon as he woke up, nicked a few books from his shelves, and escaped back to bed until well after noon. He had downed a meal that could've filled four people and promptly fell asleep on the couch afterwards. It was a spectacularly boring day and Harry soaked up every second of it. Besides Hermione lingering around and reading during a bit of a break, Harry's friends kept away from the Pit, wanting to give him a good, quiet day to relax. Harry had greatly appreciated it, too. Despite all he might try to tell himself otherwise, he *really* needed a vacation.

He had slept clean through the night and was being quite reluctant at getting out of bed that morning. Tonks had wandered off for a quick morning bath, trying to rouse Harry from his slumber after getting dressed. It had finally worked, but Harry still looked like he could sleep for another full day.

Tonks twisted around to watch Harry put up his mental barriers. His eyes were closed and his breathing grew slower for the few seconds that it took. When Harry turned to look at her, he smiled. But it was that weird, clipped smile he had worn the night he had emerged from his lockdown. His eyes held a vague sort of cloudiness to them, as well, and the usual brilliance there was dulled.

"I'll be out in a minute." He said, slipping out of bed and stretching.

"It's gonna take a long time to get used to that." Tonks said, standing up and heading for the door. "You need to learn how to make your eyes sparkle like Dumbledore."

"You know, I tried that while we were training. I got them to a faint twinkle at best." Harry stated, looking thoughtful. "I should ask him about it sometime."

Tonks rolled her eyes as she left the bedroom. She walked over to the couch and leaned back against it as she waited for Harry. Today was the first day of his detention with Umbridge. Tonks wasn't sure what that fat frog had planned for Harry, but she was convinced he could take her on, no matter what happened. The thought of Umbridge, stomping from one foot to the other, and spitting like a cat in outrage at Harry's reluctance to rise to her bait, made her smirk.

When Harry came out, he tossed Tonks' bookbag to her. "You forgot something, Nym."

"Wh... dammit, thanks. Guess my mind's been elsewhere today." Tonks said, catching it. "You gonna be okay tonight?"

"It's not going to be the most pleasant thing I've ever had to endure, but I'll take care of it, Nym. No need to worry about me." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "Whatever she has in store for me, it has to be perfectly legal by Hogwarts' standards. She can't hang me from the ceiling and whip me or anything."

"I know that!" Tonks said, swatting Harry on the arm as they made their way towards the door out. "Just saying..."

"I'll be *fine*." Harry said. "The whole point of this was to ensure I kept my cool around her. If it comes to it, I'll summon Dobby and ask him to transport me up to Dumbledore directly."

"...Yeah, I guess they can get around pretty handily." Tonks said, tilting her head. "Never given much thought to how they manage to teleport about like that."

"It's clearly different from our magic, that's for sure." Harry said, closing the door as they stepped out. "It'd be nice if I could learn to do that. Be nice in case something gets into the castle. Again. *Bye, Levi!*"

The snake on the Pit's outer door turned his head and gave Harry a small nod before curling back up.

"So we're still going with the story that you were off visiting a sick relative?" Tonks asked.

"Yeah. It'll help explain my behavioral change, as well." Harry said.

The two slipped through the invisible passage and out into the hallway. After a quick glance around, Harry continued, "One of the few times I'm truly glad people don't know the real me."

"Yeah, I'll bet." Tonks said. "Alright, let's hurry it up, huh? I wanna get some decent food in me. Got Hagrid first thing this morning."

"Oh? What's he teaching you about?" Asked Harry, glancing aside.

"Leprechauns." Tonks replied. "Twins and Ginny have been saying Ron's all hyper about it, too. Please tell me he knows that leprechaun gold has a bad tendency of disappearing."

"He's a Gryffindor." Harry replied, looking vaguely amused. "I don't think he's researched them quite enough to know that."

"I'm amazed Hermione didn't tell him outright."

"To be honest, so am I. Maybe she thinks it'll teach him a lesson." Harry said, shrugging. "Anyway, yes - food. Food is good."

"I can't believe you're *hungry*." Tonks said, glancing towards Harry's stomach. "Figured you'd still be digesting that pile of stuff from yesterday..."

"Nah, it settled a long time ago. Though that does remind me - never let me nap directly after eating again."

"Why?"

"My dreams get really strange when I'm digesting." Harry said, brow creasing slightly. "I dreamed that the twins were a pair of Cheshire Cats, I was the Hatter, you were the March Hare, Luna was the Dormouse, Leon was the Caterpillar... it was all quite..."

"Mad?" Suggested Tonks, grinning.

"Oi oi."

"I should have been Alice." Tonks stated.

"Oh? And why is that?" Asked Harry.

Tonks closed her eyes briefly and let her hair become long and blonde. She smiled sweetly as she opened her eyes again. "Because I'm prettiest when my hair is its natural color, of course."

"Well, you'll find no arguments from me." Harry said. "I've always said you should wear your real look more often."

"Yeah, but that's a special kinda thing, y'know? You're covering your real self in a type of shell now too. You should know how it is." Tonks said.

"True." Harry said. "I need to practice my Metamorphmagus powers a bit more. They haven't been properly flexed since the Yule Ball, I'm afraid."

"Mmm, frosty..." Tonks cooed, letting herself remember Harry's entrance.

"I wonder what people would say if I suddenly had knee-length hair." Harry pondered.

"They'd think you and Leon were trying to become brothers, probably." Tonks said. "Even I can't deal with hair *that* long."

"You'd look gorgeous trying, though." Harry said, smiling again.

"This is true. And you are sweet for saying so." Tonks said, leaning in to give Harry a kiss on the cheek. "So what do you have first today?"

"Arithmancy. Glad I finally got my head around it. ...I wonder how well I'll do in that subject now that I can focus better." Harry said, eyebrows raising.

"I'd never be able to deal with that. Too many numbers." Tonks said, scowling. "Never been good at math."

"Neither have I, to be honest. But it beats Hagrid's class. Have fun with your leprechauns. You should probably change your hair a different color. Don't want to have a leprechaun leaping at your head." Harry said, smirking.

"That is completely not funny." Tonks said, shuddering. "Creepy little things. Think I'd fare better if I changed my hair to green?"

"They might think you were one of them. Do blue." Harry said.

"Why blue?" Asked Tonks.

"Leprechauns are dreamers. They like to gaze at the sky during the day. It helps them keep on the watch for rainbows, too." Harry explained.

"Yeah, but won't that *a/so* just attract them to me?" Tonks groaned.

"It shouldn't." Harry said. "Not unless you turn your hair seven different colors at once. And please don't do that."

"Don't want a girlfriend with clown hair?"

"I should have never gotten you that wig." Harry groused. "Do you even still have that thing?"

"It's in my trunk." Tonks said.

"Pack rat."

"Hush."

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"Hello, Mr. Potter."

"Professor." Harry said, nodding at Umbridge as he walked into the empty classroom.

"Please have a seat, Mr. Potter." Umbridge said, getting to her feet. As Harry sat down near the front, she walked over with a quill and a small stack of parchment. Setting them down on the desk, she smiled down at him. "You will be doing lines. Please write 'I shall not tell lies' one thousand times."

Harry blinked, caught offguard. Lines? That was it? And only a thousand?

'*There has to be a catch,*' he thought. But he just offered a faint smile in return to the frog-like woman and replied, "Yes, Professor."

"I'm glad to see your attitude has improved since your little outburst." Said Umbridge, walking back toward her desk. "I understand you've had problems in the family."

"Yes, Professor." Harry said, picking up the quill and sorting the parchment out, placing a sheet in front of him. His thumb brushed along the quill quickly. '*No obvious enchantments,*' he thought.

Feeling more than ever that something wasn't right, Harry gingerly pressed the tip of the quill to the parchment. As he did, he felt a faint pinprick on the back of his right hand. Brow creasing faintly, Harry wrote out the letter 'I' and finally figured out what was going on. As he wrote, the letter 'I' also got cut into the back of his hand.

'Causing physical injury without directly doing it yourself, you hag? Very clever. You aren't the only clever magician in the room, though.' Harry thought, pausing a moment to adjust things mentally. *'I really hope this works.'*

Umbridge watched with a faint, horrid grin on her face as she saw Harry work out what she had done. There had been a brief moment where Harry had seemed almost surprised, but it quickly passed. Umbridge began to frown as Harry then continued to write, not flinching once. That wasn't right - the Blood Quill should have been leaving him breathing a little harder at the least.

"Mr. Potter." She said after watching Harry finish almost a dozen lines.

"Yes, Professor?" Asked Harry, glancing up.

"...Does the Quill not hurt?"

"It does." Harry said.

"You make it seem like it doesn't." Umbridge said.

"Oh. Sorry, Professor." Harry said. "It's just... with everything that's been happening lately, and with my Aunt falling sick like that, I guess I've just not cared about a lot."

"I see..." Umbridge said, narrowing her eyes. "Very well, Mr. Potter. Please continue."

"Yes, Professor." Harry said, glancing back down and resuming his writing. 'This is going to suck so hard when I flip my pain back on...'

It didn't take long for Harry to finish his detention. The back of his hand was bloody and raw when he finished. Umbridge, seeming irritated, quickly flicked her wand at his hand to banish away the blood. She quickly composed herself, however.

"Now then, Mr. Potter - I'll be seeing you tomorrow night at the same time." Umbridge said.

"Yes, Professor." Harry said, turning and walking out of the classroom. *'Maybe I should have just up and left the classroom when I found out what the quill did. Well... at the very least, I know my training actually came in handy for more than one thing. ...Can't go back to the Pit yet. Gotta make a detour.'*

Harry soon found himself standing outside the door to Dumbledore's office. He stared at the gargoyle statue blocking the way for awhile before sighing. "I need to see the headmaster. The school's new guest hasn't been playing well with others."

The gargoyle didn't move.

"Oh, blast it all." Harry muttered. "Blood Pops. Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. Hobgoblin HobNobs. ...What, seriously?"

Harry shook his head as the gargoyle slid to one side. Blowing out a sigh, he opened the door and made his way up the spiral staircase, knocking on the door once at the top. He heard an 'Enter!' from within and opened it up, stepping inside Dumbledore's office.

"Ah, Harry! To what do I owe this visit?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Before I say, could you..." Harry began, motioning back toward the door.

"Ah, of course." Dumbledore said, drawing his wand and giving it a few flicks.

With the office warded, Harry let out a long breath. When his eyes opened, Dumbledore saw that they were filled with pain. Before the headmaster could ask, Harry lifted his right hand. "Fudge's lackey decided to play dirty."

Standing, Dumbledore walked over, frowning as he glanced at the engraved words. "I see. Why did you not immediately leave and come see me?"

"I have my pride. I wasn't going to let her win this one." Harry muttered through clenched teeth. "Wasn't so bad. Cut off my pain and that seemed to do the trick. At the very least, she seemed shocked

that I had absolutely no reaction to carving a sentence into my hand a thousand times. She used an enchanted quill. Dunno what it was. But as I wrote my lines, they got transferred into my flesh."

"A Blood Quill." Dumbledore stated, waving his wand a few times over Harry's hand. He smiled as a look of relief washed over the teen's face. "I take it your training worked, then?"

"Not entirely sure cutting off the pain was such a bright idea, but... yeah, I got by okay." Harry stated, rubbing the back of his hand slowly. "I feel drained now."

"I'd imagine so. It takes a constant amount of focus to keep one's personal wards up. To add an addition to those - and something as drastic as what you've done - would leave one feeling very tired. I'd imagine you'll sleep well tonight, Harry." Said Dumbledore. "I will have a talk with Dolores about this. She knows better than to use such primitive punishment methods."

"I wish you wouldn't. She'd know I came to you." Harry said, stuffing his hands into his pockets and scowling. "I'd rather she not claim this as a victory."

"I will claim to have been passing through the hallways, exercising my joints, when I crossed paths with you and noticed you to be nursing your hand."

"You know she'll lie. She's probably long since disposed of the quill." Harry said.

"Perhaps. But I shall speak to her, nonetheless. The rest of your detentions with her will be less painful."

"Thanks."

"Would you like to see Poppy? I am afraid that my medical skills are not what they should be." Dumbledore said.

"I'll be alright. I've had worse. Victory scars and whatnot." Harry said, shaking his head.

"Very well. But I want you to keep a close watch on it. If it begins to look infected or if the pain returns or worsens..."

"I'll go see her. I promise." Harry said, smirking crookedly. "Do you think I could take a shortcut to the Pit, sir? All I wanna do is sit down and eat a small feast."

"Of course. The jar with the Floo Powder is in the center there." Dumbledore said, motioning towards the top of the fireplace as he walked back to his desk.

"Thanks. ...Sir?"

"Yes, Harry?"

"What happens if they find a way to remove you from the school?"

Sitting down, Dumbledore merely smiled at Harry and replied, "Do not worry about such things, Harry. Cornelius would find it difficult to find a loophole large enough to push me through."

"I hope you're right." Harry murmured, taking the top from an ornate jar and grabbing a handful of Powder. "Good night, sir."

"Good night, Harry. And thank you for coming here tonight. While I am sure you would have rather dealt with it on your own, that your body directed itself to my office tells me a great deal."

"Nymmy would be mad at me if I bled all over the couch." Harry said, grinning for a moment before closing his eyes. After taking a slow, deep breath, he tossed the Powder into the fireplace and, after calling out the name of a certain former headmistress' quarters, was gone in a flash of green.

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"Oof!"

"Harry!"

"Whoa, are you alright?"

"Where'd you come from?"

"You got ash on me."

Pulling his wand and quickly cleansing himself as he stood, Harry made a face. "I'm fine. I came from Dumbledore's office. And I'm sorry, Boris."

After directing another cleansing spell at the miniature taipan, Harry turned to see who was currently present. Tonks was sitting on the edge of the couch, Ginny was peering over the back of it, and Hermione was looking over from a corner of the room.

"Ladies night, Boris?" Hissed Harry quickly.

"Something like that." Boris hissed back.

"See anything interesting?" Asked Harry, leaning over to rub the knee he landed on.

"Just Ginny and Hermione snogging when they thought Tonks wasn't looking." Boris said.

Harry choked. So did Ginny.

"We were doing no such thing!" The redhead said, her voice higher than normal.

"Boris is developing a very dry wit. Pay him no mind." Harry said, switching back to English. "So, what's been going on while I'm been absent?"

"Not a lot." Tonks said. "I've been sitting here, waiting for you. Hermione's been reading - big surprise, I know. Ginny's been working on Potions homework and calling Snape some very creative names!"

"And I couldn't be here for it. Tsk." Harry said. "Sorry I'm late, by the way."

"Why were you coming from Dumbledore's office?" Asked Hermione.

"Needed to be healed." Harry said, once more holding his right hand up. It almost would have been a humorous reaction if it wasn't his carved-up flesh they were staring at. Tonks and Ginny both let out shocks gasps and gaped, while Hermione had to get up and walk over before she did.

"What the hell happened?!" Tonks squeaked.

"Blood Quill." Harry said, shrugging. "Whatever I wrote on the parchment also got written onto my hand. I trumped that fat toad, though. Flipped my pain off... not a bright idea in the long run, though. Dumbledore agreed. He got me fixed up, told me to keep an eye on it in case anything else happened."

"That awful woman!" Hermione huffed. "That's absolutely barbaric!"

"Sounds like something Filch would approve of." Ginny said.

Harry sat down on the couch, groaning and letting his head tilt back. "Anyway, I'm dead tired now. Really hungry, too. Soon as I can be buggered to move again, I'm going to order up enough to feed an army."

"You sure you don't wanna see Madam Pomfrey?" Asked Tonks.

"Nah. It's not that bad now. ...Crap, I'm too tired for this. Hang on." Harry said, blowing out an irritated sigh as he closed his eyes. "...There. Barriers and stuff down. I just don't have the energy to keep that going."

Rolling her eyes, Hermione turned and headed back for the chair in the corner. "And what have we learned today, class?"

"Not to over-exert ourselves, Professor Granger?" Harry offered.

"Very good! Five points to Ravenclaw!" Hermione said, sitting and picking up the book she had been reading. "Honestly, Harry. We shouldn't have to point out the obvious to you."

"This is true. But I also wasn't expecting it to thoroughly exhaust me like it did." Harry said, turning his head to look at the Gryffindor. "You're just jealous I can do all this cool mental stuff and you can't."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a *little* jealous of you, yes." Hermione sniffed, giving Harry a bored look. "But I also know it's still above me. *You*, on the other hand, have some kind of insane learning capacity. I can take things in, I can do them with a small amount of effort, but you keep making these giant *leaps* instead of building things up slowly. I'll get to your point eventually."

"So you *won't* be locking yourself up like a hermit for a week?" Ginny asked.

"Poor Ronald would throw himself from the owlery if he didn't have my notes to glance over." Hermione stated in a bland voice.

"...*Why* aren't you locking yourself up like a hermit for a week, then?" Ginny whined. "God knows I could do without the thick prat."

"Ginny..."

"Oh, I know, I know. But still." Ginny pouted.

"Up for eating yet?" Tonks asked, turning her attention back to Harry.

"I thought you'd never ask."

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"Hello, Professor."

"Mr. Potter."

"Lines again?"

"Yes."

Harry nodded and sat at the same spot he was at the previous day. The parchment and quill were already there. Figuring it best not to inspect the quill, Harry merely picked it up and, without hesitation, started to write. His eyes darted, as quickly as he dared, to his hand.

Thankfully, Dumbledore must have gotten that talk in with Umbridge, as the quill was a normal one. As he wrote, Harry figured that he owed Dumbledore one. It was a very risky move to step in and get involved. Harry knew that. But he also knew that the headmaster was very protective of those entrusted to his care.

At a few points, Harry set the quill down for a few seconds to stretch and flex his hand. He didn't need to do any of it. He was wanted to chance a glance up and around the room. When he glanced at Umbridge, he found a deep satisfaction in the irritated look on the woman's face.

"Almost done, Professor." He said, offering the woman a smile.

"Less talking, more writing then, Potter." Said Umbridge. Harry took note that she failed to add the 'Mr.' to his name.

Any victory over Umbridge was a large one and he would take what he was given.

The remainder of the week played out as mundanely as it could. His classes proved to give him the challenge and distraction that he had been seeking and his detentions with Umbridge proved to be as bland and uneventful as that second night's had been. Harry managed to keep his barriers up whenever the woman was around and, thankfully, this also meant that he didn't mouth off to the toad-woman in her class anymore. The Quidditch Team, which had been in a serious state of disarray since Lynch had graduated, was in desperate need of guidance. Harry was, in fact, the only remaining member of the team he had originally joined, as Timothy Ratchett and Melissa Tracer, a beater and a chaser, respectively, had graduated last year.

Chris Ericson, who would be one of Harry's dorm-mates had he ever bothered returning to Ravenclaw Tower, had taken helm as Keeper and Captain of the team. He was alright at his job, but he just didn't have the same kind of madness that Lynch had when he had been in command. Harry had often wondered what the fifth year boys' dorm had to look like. Harry was never around. Terry had apparently disappeared into the aether, as no one had heard from him still. Solieyu, as far as Harry knew, slept in the Nest when he slept at all.

The only people there were Chris and Gary Haskit. Harry never did get around to making friends with those two.

The next training session's date had yet to be decided, but Eric (as well as the rest of the team) seemed relieved that Harry would be around for their first real game. Harry missed the feeling of the wind blowing through his hair. The last time he had been on his Firebolt was, unless his memory failed him, during the First Task the previous year. That was far too long to have been off a broom. Too much was occupying Harry's time - he needed a break from all the worrying and he knew it.

His hand was healing up fine. Tonks had practically dragged him to the hospital wing the fourth night of his detention after he complained about it itching. Despite his protests, Harry allowed the girl to haul him in, figuring she was just overly worried. Madam Pomfrey, after chastising him for avoiding her, gave him a clean bill of health.

The only thing bothering Harry - really bothering him - was what Umbridge had said the final night of his detention. He had handed in his lines and the quill and was almost to the door when she spoke up. She had said that while Harry had won this battle, she'd get her way in the end. That didn't sit right with Harry as well, and it made him wonder what she and Fudge were talking about and planning.

Harry had taken a long bath that final night, bringing Boris in to talk to. The two talked, at great length, over Umbridge's possible plans and what her unnerving and poorly-veiled threat could mean. Boris had said that the frog-like woman could pose a great threat should the Ministry mobilize. This lead down a course that got the two talking about guarding the Pit somehow. Just in case.

That night, as Harry drifted off, he came to a decision.

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"Dumbledore's Office, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

There was a burst of green flames and, moments later, the disembodied head of Albus Dumbledore appeared in the Pit's fireplace. "Ah, Harry. What can I do for you?"

"I'd uh... well, this is a very odd request, sir..." Harry said, fidgeting.

"Is anything wrong?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Oh no, I'm fine. Everyone here is. It's just... ..well... I want to mail a letter." Harry said.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I see. Afraid to send one out through normal means?"

"A bit, yes. I may just be jumpy, but I'd bet that Umbridge or the Ministry is intercepting all post coming in or out of Hogwarts." Harry said. "And I know that you have more...secure... means of doing things."

"Indeed I do." Dumbledore said. "Please, step on through."

"Thank you, sir."

After retrieving his letter, Harry used the fireplace to get to the headmaster's office. Rubbing the sore knee he landed on, Harry hobbled over to the chair on the other side of Dumbledore's desk and sat. Dumbledore himself remained standing until after Harry was seated, looking down at his fireplace.

Harry watched him, brow creased. "Is something wrong with the fireplace?"

"...I wonder." Dumbledore said, turning and heading back to his own chair. "Something did not feel entirely right, and I shall look into the matter. Just the same, I believe it would do us both well if you left and came the normal way."

"They can't be monitoring inter-school fireplace chats, can they?" Harry asked.

"You'd be surprised what the Ministry can do if they so desire." Dumbledore said. "But let us not worry over what could be merely an old man being paranoid."

"...Right. Uh, yeah, like I was saying, though. Could I possibly have Fawkes deliver a letter to Sirius?" Harry asked, glancing aside at the phoenix, who was napping in his cage.

Dumbledore smiled at the mention of Sirius' name. "If you are worried about him, I can ensure you that he's as fine as he ever was. Despite their rivalry, Molly does an admirable job in keeping him busy."

"Well, that was part of it, yeah." Harry admitted. "I take it he knows what's happening here?"

"As much as any of the rest of us, yes." Dumbledore said.

"I was also kind of hoping he'd be able to drop off any more books he'd salvaged. I know Mrs. Weasley was trying to remove all the 'dark' books from the Black Family Library." Harry said.

Chuckling, Dumbledore nodded. "She is from old stock, I'm afraid. A wonderful woman, to be sure, but very set in her ways. I must say, Harry, I am surprised at the interest you have taken to reading about the Dark Arts."

"Yeah, well, no offense or anything, sir, but we're not exactly learning a lot in class." Harry said, smiling apologetically at the headmaster, who merely grinned in response. "Plus, it... I'm not sure how to describe my attraction to the subject. Part of it's that I seem to find myself *surrounded* by it on a regular basis. I naturally want to know what could be thrown at me. But the other part is working out countermeasures. All spells have a counter. Or all of them *should*."

"Trying to find a way to reverse the Killing Curse, Harry?" Asked the headmaster, raising his eyebrows.

"No. I know bringing back the dead is impossible." Harry said, eyes downcast. Then, in a sneer, he added, "At least, it *should* be."

"It is a dangerous path you travel, Harry." Dumbledore said, his voice taking a serious edge. "Many witches and wizards have attempted to either stop or reverse death. Inferi are the only thing to be born from this desire."

"There has to be a way to stop it, though." Harry said. "If you can't reverse it, the obvious solution is to find a way to stop it. Clearly, no shield spell will hold against the Avada Kedavra. I'm just wondering if absorption is the key. Not stopping it, not reversing it - absorbing it."

"Perhaps. But you must also think - many others have come to the same conclusion. And yet, thus far at least, nobody has come forth with a solution. You have a high load to bear as it is, Harry. Please, try not to concern yourself with such things until after you graduate."

Dumbledore didn't say it, but Harry knew there was an extra line there. Something akin to '*If* you graduate, that is.' Harry knew it was a possibility just as well as Dumbledore did. Voldemort wanted him dead. There would be a 'final fight,' so to speak. Harry just prayed it took place later than sooner, knowing full well that delaying it meant that more innocent people would fall.

"...Anyway, I'm sorry. I got extremely sidetracked there." Harry said, sighing. "I didn't mean to go off on some wild tangent in regards to counter-curses. I was just looking up reference materials and was hoping Sirius' library had some of them."

"I see." Dumbledore said, the twinkle quickly returning to his eyes. "Well then, it is a simple matter of waiting for Fawkes to awaken. I am afraid that phoenixes are sometimes very finicky creatures. They need quite a bit of rest and will not awaken until they are ready."

"That's fine. Like you said, I shouldn't be in a hurry. I have plenty of time to think about it. There's other stuff I should be thinking about." Harry said, setting the letter on the headmaster's desk. "...And if I don't get going, I'm going to completely miss breakfast."

Dumbledore stood, walking Harry to the door. "I will make sure Sirius gets the letter. And I will contact you via more secure means than our fireplaces when I get the inevitable reply."

"I appreciate it, sir. You've really done a lot to help me out already this year." Harry said. "I feel kind of bad for it all."

"Considering all the trouble that seems to come to you whilst in Hogwarts, I feel that a few favors here and there, so long as they are

not extravagant, may be allowed. You and your friends staying out of designated sleeping quarters, for instance." Dumbledore said. Harry could almost *hear* the smirk in his voice.

"Yeah, was wondering about that." Harry mumbled. "Uh... anyway, thanks again, sir!"

"Have a good day, Harry."

"You too!" Harry said, quickly climbing down the spiral stairway.

Once he was past the gargoyle statue outside and heading towards the Great Hall, Harry let himself relax a little. He didn't like outwardly lying to the headmaster like that. He really *did* appreciate all that Dumbledore did for him. He wasn't quite sure that his lie passed, either. He never felt Dumbledore trying to pry into his mind, but he also knew that if the headmaster really wanted to, he could. Harry's barriers were still fresh. The night he had uncorked himself from the training room? He had been able to fling the headmaster from his mind because Dumbledore had allowed him to.

It was true that Harry was writing to Sirius. It was also true that he was writing in regards to books he feared that Mrs. Weasley had gotten to by now. The lie came in the form of what books he was actually after. He knew that trying to stop the Killing Curse was a nigh impossible feat. He also felt rather stupid for aiming down that path with his lie. But, all things considered, it at least made sense.

No, Harry didn't want to try and stop death itself. He wanted to find out how to summon something. He wanted to make a contract with some sort of magical beast. Something that he could trust to protect the Pit and his friends when he wasn't there to do so himself.

The Pit would have a guardian. He even knew what type of creature he was looking to summon. He had discussed it with Boris the night his detentions had come to an end and the two came to an uneasy agreement. Harry just hoped the books he had spied at Grimmauld Place weren't gone. He felt stupid for not taking them when he had the chance. But he honestly hadn't thought the need would come so *soon*.

With any luck, the books were there and Sirius would find a method of getting them through.

It was all just a matter of time.

Chapter 12 – Drastic Measures

"I'm glad I get to get outta here for awhile." Sirius said, hands in his pockets as he stood near the fireplace. "Even if it's just to have lunch with my godson."

"What are you going to say to Albus?" Asked Lupin, who was sitting on one of the room's couches.

"What Harry asked me to." Sirius said, shrugging. "No idea why he wants me to go behind Albus' back, but it's gotta be important."

"Indeed. Try and pry the real reason out of him, will you?" Lupin asked. "It's rather bothersome not to know why he wanted books like that."

"Yeah. I'm gonna try talking the info outta him before I fork over the goods." Sirius said. "This crap's pretty tough. Dunno if guys like US could even summon something from these things..."

"Let us hope we never have to try, then." Lupin said, smiling. "You'd best get going, Sirius. Don't want to be late."

Sirius rolled his eyes and grabbed a handful of powder from the jar atop the fireplace. "Oh be quiet, you big woman. You just want to shoot the breeze with Molly. Admit it!"

Lupin sputtered into his tea. "I *beg* your pardon?!"

"Oh, don't think I didn't hear you!" Sirius said, grinning as he looked over his shoulder. "For someone with enhanced senses, you sure didn't hear me sneaking up on you. I heard all about your horrible little topic."

"It... Sirius, we were just..." Lupin faltered.

"Oh no, no need to explain to me, Moony." Sirius said, throwing the fireplace and calling out the name of Dumbledore's office. Just before stepping through, however, he grinned back at Lupin and added, "Long as you two don't start talking about bedding and frills and lace around me, I don't care how much you two gush about beds."

Lupin glared as his friend vanished in the green flames.

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"Ah, Sirius! How are you?" Dumbledore said as Sirius hopped out of the fireplace.

Dusting himself off, Sirius grinned. "Well, I'd be better if there was a better way to get to where Harry was. Did you do something to your fireplace?"

"You could say that." Dumbledore said, getting to his feet and walking around his desk. "It came to my attention recently that someone could have been spying on my fireplace. I put a few 'road blocks' in the way, so to speak."

"Spying? On you? Who'd have the balls for that?" Sirius asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Chuckling at Sirius' choice of words, Dumbledore replied, "Someone without any at all. Now then, I was in contact with Harry earlier - we've 'fixed' his fireplace, as well - and he's waiting for you. Did you bring the books he was asking about?"

Sirius nodded, patting his pocket. "He talk to you much about it?"

"He did." Dumbledore said. "Though I don't believe his story. He's not quite good enough to keep me out yet."

"So what's his goal?" Asked Sirius. "I mean, I got the gist of it from the book list, but..."

"I believe he wishes to protect his 'Pit,' as he calls it." Dumbledore said. "If I might, could I see the books he has asked for?"

"Sure." Sirius said, pulling a half dozen shrunken books from his pockets. "Want me to enlarge them?"

"My eyesight isn't quite that bad yet." Dumbledore said, smiling at Sirius as he scanned the titles of the books. "...I see. Sirius, if you would..."

"Yeah, Moony wanted me to have a little talk with him about their content, too. Just glad I don't hafta try keeping up a lie around you. I'm terrible at Occlumency." Sirius said, smiling crookedly and pocketing the books as Dumbledore handed them back. "Do you think he'll be alright?"

"I think he's more than capable of the act itself. I am more worried about the nature of the creature he wishes to summon." Dumbledore said. "That being said, I would like you to relay a message from me. It will be easier hearing it from you, I feel. Tell him that I give him my blessing to move forward with his plan on one condition - that I am contacted and present for the rituals. Harry has not faced anything like that before. I have."

"Well, that'd lift some stress from my shoulders." Sirius said, nodding slowly as Dumbledore spoke. "Thanks, Albus. I'm actually a bit surprised that you're going to let him bring one of those things into the school."

"The times are grave, my friend." Dumbledore said. "Especially right now. Dolores Umbridge has not been idle. I am... unsure of how long I can remain here."

"What do you mean?" Asked Sirius.

"A few isolated incidents have happened this year. Incidents that, unfortunately, Dolores has been present for. And, as she reports directly to Cornelius..."

"Does she know the stuff that's happened the last few years?" Sirius asked.

"She does." Dumbledore said. "In any case, you have no need to worry about me. If anything *should* happen, Minerva is more than capable of running the school until I can get a foothold again. And, if you would, please say nothing of this to Harry. The poor boy has enough on his mind."

"Yeah. ...Crap, what time is it? I'm going to be late at this rate..." Sirius said, wincing.

"You will make it with seconds to spare." Dumbledore said, grinning once more. "Go. Enjoy your lunch."

"See you in a bit, then!" Sirius said. And, after grabbing another handful of Floo Powder, he had once more hopped into roaring green flames and vanished.

Dumbledore waited until the flames died down before turning and walking back to his chair. Sitting down, he gazed at the notice on his desk. He had been reading and re-reading it for nearly an hour now, all to no avail. Cornelius truly had him by the throat this time.

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"Great. So my plan to avoid him finding out fell completely on its face?" Harry groaned as he and Sirius entered the Pit's dining room.

"Pretty much, kiddo." Sirius said, grinning and setting the now-enlarged books on the table. "Sorry."

"No, no. This makes it easier. I just wonder sometimes why he gives me as much freedom as he does. Having my own quarters alone should be enough to get into trouble. Not attending classes for a week to learn Occlumency. Now this." Harry said, waving a hand dismissively.

"Albus' mind works in strange ways. I try not to think about it too much. Gives me a headache." Sirius said.

"Probably for the best. So, how've things been back at your house?" Harry asked.

"Well," Sirius began, tapping his plate to order up. "Molly is driving me crazy as usual, but it's a lot more peaceful with my mother's portrait gone. I don't think I can thank you enough times for blasting her."

"Mrs. Weasley's to blame for it, too. How weird is that?" Harry said, chuckling as he ordered as well. "If she hadn't pissed me off, I never would have had the anger needed to fuel the Eximo."

"If nothing else, I can try duct taping her to the ceiling, huh?" Sirius said.

Harry snorted.

"So, how're things going for you? I hear word that things aren't working out as well as they could this year." Sirius said, picking up his goblet and taking a sip of his juice.

"Ugh, don't remind me." Harry said, shaking his head. "That frog woman's trying my patience even *with* my Occlumency training. Aside from her, though... I dunno. Leon's been acting weird for awhile and he really hasn't been around much. Even Luna says he's not seemed like himself lately. Nym and I are doing alright, though she isn't liking the work load that's starting to hit us. The twins are the twins. Hermione reads a lot. Ginny's made a circle of friends that she hangs out with, so she isn't around much either. And I just don't know about Parkinson..."

"Oh?"

"It's like... I dunno, Sirius. Can I be perfectly candid with you here?"

"I won't tell a soul a thing you tell me today." Sirius said.

"I think... she's been spending time with Malfoy. Trying to convince him." Harry said, staring down at his untouched plate of food.

"Convince him?" Asked Sirius. "Of what?"

"That he should just join us. Our side, I mean." Harry said, looking up at his godfather. "Malfoy sent me that letter, Sirius. I can't imagine what the hell was going on in his mind to make him do that. Whatever happened when the Death Eaters took their kids to meet Riddle, it must have completely flipped his world. I told him, though. I said that his father was nothing to Voldemort. Maybe it was finally seeing with his own eyes that the man he thought was so damned flawless was nothing more than a boot-kissing toady like all the rest."

"So he's trying to wrestle with himself over what to do." Sirius said, nodding slowly. "Brat's probably been spoiled his whole life. More

than likely, all of the things programmed into him came from his father. Probably followed his orders without question his entire life."

"And now that he's seen the truth, he has no idea what direction to turn." Harry finished, taking a swig of his pumpkin juice and sighing. "Pansy's trying to convince him that I'm not the person he believes me to be. I can understand his logic, though. If the roles were reversed, I wouldn't be very bloody eager to join up with him, either. I'm thinking... I'm thinking of opening the Pit's doors to him..."

"Are you sure?" Asked Sirius. "That's... putting a lot of trust into him, Harry. If he chooses the wrong side and stays on the path Lucius has kept him on his whole life, he could flush you and your friends out in a heartbeat."

"I know. That's part of the reason I want the Pit to be guarded." Harry said, motioning towards the books. "I need something that strong just in case. Full grown wizarding teams have a hard time taking those down without the right knowledge. If Malfoy ever betrays me, it will know how to respond. And the thing is, the really hilarious thing is, I *want* to believe in Malfoy, Sirius. He took great personal risk writing to me. If his owl had been intercepted, he'd probably be in Voldemort's hideout being tortured. This is IF he wasn't killed outright. He knew this was greater than our stupid schoolboy fights. He rose above that and warned me of the Dementors. I trusted his judgment once. I want to do so again and offer something of my own - sanctuary."

"It's your call, kiddo. Just be careful, alright? Dumbledore wants to be here when you summon it, though. That's your condition for being allowed this." Sirius said.

"Yeah, I figured as much. I might ask him to be here when and if I decide to allow Malfoy into the Pit, too. Just to be on the safe side. It's going to probably take a long time to read through those books, digest their information, and gather whatever I need to perform the ritual..." Harry said.

"You'd risk letting him in before you summon your safeguard?" Sirius asked.

"I would. If I did this *after* the summoning, he might see that as me not trusting him. At least this way, he'll know about it beforehand." Harry said.

"And that would give him time to find a way to fight it." Sirius pointed out.

"Yes, but I don't think he'd be capable of beating it." Harry said. "Malfoy's strong, Sirius, but not *that* strong. I should be able to handle him if it were to come down to a one on one confrontation."

"And if he has support?" Asked Sirius.

"I have plenty willing to fight by my side. I'm not worried about it." Harry stated, spearing some broccoli with his fork and popping it into his mouth.

"Your call, but like I said - be careful. You're dealing with a lot of unknowns here, kiddo."

"I know. And it worries me, too. But if I show Malfoy that he can be safe - that he can be kept out of Voldemort's grip - I'm sure he'll make the right decision. I might talk it over with Dumbledore next chance I get, I dunno yet. I heard he's the one who saved Snape all those years ago. Wonder if any of this kinda stuff went through HIS mind."

Sirius chuckled. "Probably not. Albus is more the type to just push forward and worry about any consequences after the fact. It isn't to say he doesn't take problems into account, it's just that he's good at talking his way out of things."

"Yeah. Well, I guess I can only do what I think is right and hope it works out, yeah?" Harry said.

"Pretty much."

The rest of the meal continued in relative silence. Sirius watched Harry carefully as they ate. The boy was clearly troubled by multiple things. It gave Sirius a headache just to think about what his godson had piled on his plate. He certainly wouldn't have been able to juggle that kind of load. Especially during his fifth year. But, he reasoned, if

anyone could straighten things out, it was Harry. He just hoped the boy knew what he was doing.

The Malfoys could be very dangerous when threatened. Sirius knew that. He had clashed with Lucius on more than one encounter in the past. He was quite sure that the elder Malfoy still held some form of grudge against him. Trying to convince his son to not only break ties with Voldemort but his own parents, though? That would prove to be a great challenge.

Sirius smiled mentally, though. If anyone could do something like that, it was Harry.

'Well, James,' Sirius thought as he wolfed down a second helping of steak and eggs, 'I hope I'm doing alright by you. I know Lily'd flip out if she knew what he was upto. Guess it's just one big game of chance now...'

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Less than a week later, Harry found himself pacing around the Pit, his mind overclocking itself in an attempt to figure out just what in the hell was going on. Dumbledore was gone. He was simply gone. He hadn't been at any meals that day and Harry had been unable to contact his office. It was as if the connection between their fireplaces had been cut off. The staff seemed to be increasingly irritated with each meal that passed.

Except Umbridge. She looked quite pleased with herself.

Logically, the only thing Harry could think of was that Umbridge and Fudge had been able to find a way to remove Dumbledore from Hogwarts. Harry didn't know to the extent of his removal, but it had to be the answer. Nothing else made sense. Dumbledore wouldn't just up and abandon the school without warning.

With Dumbledore gone, things got a lot more complicated. Harry assumed McGonagall, as the second in command, would take control of the school. That was fine to Harry, who never had any major qualms with the cranky Transfiguration teacher. But Dumbledore being gone in a time when Voldemort was back was immensely bad.

Harry wasn't sure what the hell it would take for Fudge to admit that Voldemort had returned. The Prophet was still covering up Death Eater-related deaths. Despite the Dark Mark being confirmed, the newspaper was reporting that it was merely some sick kind of copycat killers - fans of the Death Eaters' way of doing things.

But that wasn't the only thing annoying Harry. No, not by a good clip. Ginny had stormed into the Pit that morning with a letter written by her older brother Percy. Apparently, Percy was blindly taking the Minister's side. The letter had stated that Harry was a danger to be around, that he was making things up for attention, and that he was going to get 'caught' at some point for breaking the rules. The twins had gotten a copy of the letter, too. Thankfully, everyone but Ron refused to believe Percy's ranting, and Ginny had said that Hermione was doing a good job of convincing even *him*.

In addition, Solieyu was acting decidedly stranger. He seemed to be shying away from large groups of people. He was vanishing without reason for hours on end. And he always seemed to have a sizable collection of girls making googly eyes at him when he *did* turn up somewhere. Harry asked Luna what the heck was going on, but the blonde was clueless herself. She said that he hadn't wanted to talk about his apparently growing fanclub, nor why he hated to be around other people now. More worrying was that Harry actually caught Tonks staring at him funny one day at lunch. He had to call her name a few times before she blinked owlishly and looked at him, confused.

Harry had hidden the books Sirius had brought him under a loose stone in the floor of the training room. He figured they were safer there than in his trunk, despite its relative safety. His plans to find a way to talk to Malfoy had been blown out of the water by everything else descending at once, but he *had* caught up to Pansy one day.

She had said that Malfoy still wasn't talking much and that he seemed conflicted when he did. Crabbe and Goyle officially weren't hanging around him anymore, though. And Blaise Zabini had given up trying to talk to the broody Slytherin long ago. Harry ran his plan by Pansy, who seemed nervous about the issue, too. She asked Harry to give her a little more time and that, if Malfoy still hadn't decided by December, that he should go ahead.

Boris hadn't been able to offer Harry any words of comfort to try and ease his worrying. But then, Harry was almost grateful for that. He didn't need to be coddled, he needed to solve what was going on. That's what he *did*. He solved problems. He fixed things. He restored things to how they *should* be.

But that meant turning Malfoy before the Death Eater children were to be branded, figuring out what was wrong with his vampiric friend, working out where Dumbledore had gone and *why*, making sure he had the materials necessary to perform the summoning ritual, and trying to keep his cool around that horrible frog woman!

Harry stopped pacing when he ran by all of that again in his mind. Suddenly feeling exhausted, he let himself slump down onto the couch, his eyes instinctively drawn towards the ever-crackling flames in the fireplace. Even though the Occulmency grew easier to keep in place with each passing day, it still took a lot out of him. And cracks were forming in his supposedly-flawless barrier. He was worried, he was tired, and he had no one to turn to for advice.

Certainly, he could talk to Flitwick, but Harry didn't connect with his head of house the same way he connected with Dumbledore. Dumbledore felt more like family than a professor, which was such an odd notion that it made Harry chuckle. If someone had told him that he would be this concerned over the man who kept forcing him to return to Privet Drive every summer, he would have said they were crazy. And yet here he was, troubled by Dumbledore's absence. Whatever Umbridge had done, it had given that bastard Fudge the means to kick Dumbledore from his own school.

Harry let his head loll back, his eyes slipping shut. His neck muscles were far too tight, and his shoulders were aching. His world was starting to come apart piece by piece. He wasn't in control and he hated it.

Logically, there was something he could do to try and sort things out... but he didn't want to. It meant crossing a lot of barriers he wasn't sure he wanted to. But maybe he wouldn't have to take the direct route. On more than one occasion, Harry had felt Snape attempt to look into his mind. He wasn't sure how often the Potions Master had done that

prior to Harry's training. But it might be useful this time. He just hoped it would work.

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'Piss and damn,' Harry swore mentally. It had been two days since he had decided to test the waters against Snape's Legilimency. And an irritating trend had popped up in that time. Umbridge was sitting in on other teachers' classes. She would pick a spot behind the professor and interrupt regularly, asking them useless questions and clearing her throat in a way that made Harry want to throw her to the giant squid.

It had been mildly amusing seeing McGonagall stare her down, though. The Transfiguration professor had indeed assumed command of the school, which had left Umbridge looking annoyed. But she had gotten over it quickly enough. Almost too quickly. Harry didn't like it.

And now...

Now he was in Potions with two people he couldn't stand. Who the hell did he take the side of if they got into an argument?

*'Well... I guess Snape's. He's a greasy bastard, but he's **our** greasy bastard. She's an outsider. And I need Snape's help,'* Harry thought, watching as the Potions Master glared daggers at Umbridge, who had taken up a corner of the room. *'C'mon, you jackass... try prodding my mind again...'*

Class proceeded normally for the first half hour, with Snape seeming more waspish than he normally did. But things really heated up when Umbridge began her questioning of his methods. It took Snape less than five minutes to put the Defense professor in her place - speechless and seated. Even with his barriers in place, Harry couldn't hide the smile on his face. A smile that, oddly enough, seemed to garner Snape's attention.

"And what, Mr. Potter, do you find so amusing?" Asked Snape as he walked towards Harry and Tonks' table.

"Nothing, sir." Harry said, his eyes meeting Snape's. He used all his power and 'pushed' against the barrier that Harry had been expecting. He wasn't disappointed. One of Snape's eyebrows cocked up and, seconds later, Harry felt the Potions Master pushing against his own barrier. He was damn near as strong as Dumbledore, which caught Harry off-guard, even though it shouldn't have. Snape had worked for Voldemort in the past. There had to be a few levels of security on something like that.

Harry let Snape in, as he wasn't sure he could keep him out anyway, and forced open the memory of him pacing the Pit. He wasn't sure how many members of staff had been informed of Harry's hideout, but if he wanted the Potions professor's help, he had to learn to give a little.

The staring match lasted mere seconds, but the information that passed between the two was great. When Snape pulled out, he gave Harry an unreadable look before turning and heading back towards his desk.

At the end of the class, after Umbridge had excused herself, Snape called for Harry to remain afterwards, stating that they needed to have a talk about his careless brewing habits. Harry readily agreed, knowing full well that he hadn't done *that* poor a job on the throwaway potion they had been creating.

Harry assured Tonks that he would be fine and, after giving him a strange look, headed out with the other students. Once the last had filed out and the doors had shut, Harry turned and looked at Snape, who was still sitting behind his desk.

"You've learned some new tricks, Potter."

"I felt it necessary. Should we dance around the issue or get straight to the point, sir?"

"To the point would be best." Snape stated, getting to his feet. "You wish to find out what is wrong with Mr. Malfoy and offer him safety from the Dark Lord. Correct?"

"Yes, sir." Said Harry. "I don't suppose he's come to you? Pansy's been talking to him, but I don't get much of a chance to talk to her these days."

"He has come to me, in fact. Quite torn up by the decision rapidly approaching him. He made no mention of the assistance he had given you, of course. Merely that he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Wondering if his father was the man he had believed him to be." Snape said.

"Sounds about right." Harry said, sighing and running a hand back through his hair. "Do you think I should approach him, sir? I have to do something before they get the Mark. But I don't think Pansy's going to be able to do this herself. He needs confirmation, from me, that I can help. It would help if the headmaster were around. Any idea on where he's gone, sir?"

"Fudge." Snape said, venom laced in his voice. "Our beloved Minister has seen fit to remove the headmaster from Hogwarts during these dark days."

"On what grounds?"

"Unfit teaching methods."

"Bloody toad."

"Indeed."

Harry scowled. "If things got any worse..."

"Oh, but they will, Potter. Minerva is unsure of how long she'll be able to keep her position as deputy headmistress. It would appear Umbridge is trying to wrest that away as well. It would appear that Fudge is trying to completely take Hogwarts under the Ministry's wing, as it were." Snape said.

"Fantastic." Harry muttered.

"In regards to Mr. Malfoy... that is your decision. I can only assume Albus knew of your... rooms. And in times such as these, sometimes

drastic measures must be taken. Be aware that, as staff, we cannot assist you should anything happen. We are all under sharp watch these days. Umbridge has tapped many students to be her eyes and ears within these walls." Snape stated.

"One final question, sir."

"Yes?"

"I was hoping you'd help me with some answers... but this is a bit much. Why so helpful all of a sudden? Don't think it isn't greatly appreciated, but..." Harry trailed off.

"As I've stated, Potter - sometimes drastic measures must be taken. You seem to have an uncanny way of making the impossible possible, loathe though I am to admit it. This is beyond my capabilities. Draco left just as confused as when he came to me. In addition, I feel that those within this school must oversee any personal differences when faced with outside interference. This is no different than if the Dark Lord tried to launch a direct assault on Hogwarts grounds. And before you ask, I've overheard no such plans." Snape explained. "Though the invasion from the Ministry is no different. You are aware, of course, that the Dark Lord has people within the Ministry?"

"Naturally." Harry said.

"Umbridge is one of them." Snape said.

Harry closed his eyes as a chill shot down his spine. Gritting his teeth, he gave a nod and looked back to the Potions Master. "Kind of figured. Good to hear confirmation."

"She is the one who sent the Dementors after you. By the time I heard, it was too late to do anything. It was only by chance that Albus was around when you needed him. Your luck saved you again, Potter." Snape said.

"Getting a little tired of the good luck and bad luck trying to beat each other. Just once it'd be nice for them to balance out. The odds are always stacked against my favor, it seems." Harry said.

"Such is life." Snape said. "Any further questions, Potter?"

"No. I think I've asked all I wanted to."

"And Draco?"

"...We'll see." Harry said, pushing himself away from the desk he had been leaning against and turning for the door. "We'll see."

Chapter 13 – Convergence

Author's Note: I'm doing this before starting the chapter to curtail what I know will be an inevitable swarm of flames and bitching. Things start down the road I've wanted them to go down since I started the R-Series in this chapter. Which means things begin to get dark. Dark and angsty. It won't last forever, of course. But I know some people will whine to high hell if there's even the tiniest bit of angst in their fic. To you I say - **get out**. Harry's going to hit a giant series of roadblocks, things aren't going to be good for him for a LONG while, and it's all going to end with a spectacular, white explosion on Azkaban come book 6. This chapter sets up the rest of the book and most of 6. Again: if you don't want to continue, that's fine. But if you do and don't like it, don't come whining to me. You lose that right to bitch when you pass the scene break and start the story itself.

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It was getting worse.

And Harry was powerless to stop it.

Things were falling apart around him and he could do nothing about it.

McGonagall had lost control of Hogwarts.

Umbridge was now in charge.

Harry's friends were coming to the Pit less and less as the rules became stricter.

And December was almost upon them.

Harry's moods had been fluxuating like the wind as of late, with everything seemingly going to pieces. Whatever Umbridge and Fudge were doing, it was bad. Hogwarts seemed to cry out the day Filch had started erecting new rules Umbridge had made up in the Entrance Hall. Harry wasn't sure if anyone else could hear the school, but he could. He knew Hogwarts. It had soaked up so much magic

over the years that Harry was sure it was just shy of being completely sentient.

Hogwarts had been seized and he didn't know how to fix it. He didn't know how to get Umbridge out of Dumbledore's rightful place as headmaster. He had gone over numerous ideas in his head, none of which lead to pleasant endings. In fact, the more he thought about things, the worse they seemed to become. There wasn't a single thing that had gone right as of late.

Harry didn't like the lack of control and he planned to start from the bottom in regaining some semblance of it. On November 30, he requested that everyone meet in the Pit for dinner, as he had something to talk about. It couldn't wait.

Harry sat in the dining room for nearly an hour before anyone else entered. Boris was curled up around his neck, resting peacefully. Harry had his elbows on the table, his fingers locked together so he could rest his chin on them. He didn't speak to the miniature taipan, choosing to merely stare across the room at the closed door. He still wasn't sure this was the safest path to take, or even the sanest. But it had to be done. He needed more help. He needed more control. He had to start doing something before there was no chance left.

After what felt like an eternity, the door opened. Hermione entered, startled slightly as Harry's unblinking gaze rose to meet hers.

"Harry? Are... are you alright?" She asked.

"Whether or not I'm alright," Harry began, not moving his head, "Will depend on how tonight's events go. See anyone else on your way?"

"No, but all of us in Gryffindor decided to come down in waves to avoid attention as much as possible." Hermione said, crossing the room and sitting.

"Good plan." Harry murmured, his eyes moving from Hermione back to the now-open door.

Hermione watched Harry for awhile as they waited for more people to show up. It was clear to her that his Occlumency barriers were up. If

Harry's mannerisms were anything to judge it by, she would have believed them to be stronger than ever before. Something seemed strange about Harry. His breathing was very slow, and he only blinked once every few minutes. He was almost perfectly motionless, as well.

She decided against saying anything. His voice had been very subdued, though there was a tremendous amount of emotion in it. Whatever he wanted everyone to gather for, it must have been really serious.

The stream of people sped up slightly after Hermione's arrival. Ginny came next, having much the same reaction as Hermione upon seeing Harry's expression. The twins followed a few minutes later. They seemed almost somber and merely nodded at Harry as they took their seats. Umbridge had all but put a stop to their pranking, and they had been left in an irritable state. It was clear that they were thinking of something to exact their revenge on Umbridge, though what that was was anyone's guess.

Luna, Solieyu, and Tonks arrived in a group almost ten minutes after the twins did. Tonks sat near the far end of the table and Harry refused to look at her. Hermione and Ginny both seemed to notice a tiny, quick moment where Harry's barriers faltered. Whatever was going on between the two, it must not have been good. With Umbridge's new rules coming into effect, the group had really lacked much time to sit around and talk. Luna seemed as quiet as ever, simply looking in odd fascination at the expression on Harry's face before she sat. Solieyu looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but the Pit.

The final arrival was Pansy. It took nearly half an hour before she showed up. But once she had, and once she shut the door behind her, Harry seemed to revive. He lifted his head and crossed his arms on the table, his gaze moving around the table, surveying everyone.

"Thank you all for coming. It's been awhile since we've had a chance like this. I'm sure most of you have an idea of why I've asked everyone to gather." Harry said. "Most of you are wrong."

"Wrong? So... this isn't about Umbridge?" Asked Ginny.

"To a degree. But no, not directly. I do plan to somehow remove her from power. But I need more help. I need to do something and I don't think any of you, excluding Pansy, will like what it is." Harry stated.

"Why excluding me?" Asked Pansy, cocking an eyebrow.

"Because you, my dear Parkinson," Harry began, gazing across the table, "Are going to go get who I *really* need to speak to."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the only one who can." Harry said, his voice growing quiet.

"...Harry? Who do you *want* to speak to?" Asked Hermione, glancing from Harry to Pansy.

Ignoring Hermione, Harry continued, "You know this has to happen. You know it does. We have to do this now. Tell me... how is he?"

A look of comprehension entered the girl's eyes. "...Nervous. Moody. Jumpy. The closer it gets, the worse he gets."

"Which is why we have to act." Harry said, slamming his hands on the table as he got to his feet. "Pansy, go back to the Slytherin common room, find Malfoy, and bring him back here."

There was an immediate uproar.

Harry closed his eyes and blew out a slow breath. And, as his eyes opened again, he roared, "**QUIET! ALL OF YOU!**"

"You can't be serious." Ginny said, looking at Harry as though he had grown another head. "Malfoy's... you *can't* be serious, Harry."

"Oh? Why?" Asked Harry, looking down at the redhead, who flinched and didn't offer a reply.

Harry walked around the table, where Pansy had stood as well. "Go. I'll deal with them while you're gone."

"You're taking a big risk, Potter." Pansy said, opening the door to the room before turning and stepping up to Harry. "Draco's been unpredictable lately. As much as I want to save him, how do you know he can be trusted?"

"I believe in him." Harry stated, offering the Slytherin a faint smile. "Go, Pansy. Get him and bring him to me. This ridiculous five year long fight between he and I ended before this school year even began. And I want to finally get that chance to talk he spoke of."

Giving Harry a strange look, Pansy nodded slowly, turning and quickly walking out of the Pit. When Levi's door had closed behind her, the din immediately began again. Harry brought a hand up, raising his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. He listened as arguments were thrown, accusations of him finally snapping were said, and questions as to why Harry wanted to abandon the Pit were brought up.

He waited, and he listened, and once everyone had quieted down, he turned to face them again. "Have I snapped? Maybe. If wanting to save a man who has been brainwashed by his Death Eater parents all of his life is considered snapping. If wanting to repay a debt to a man is considered snapping. Maybe I have lost my mind, kids, I'm not entirely sure. Been a lot going on lately, after all! We've been scattered back through the school with no real chance to sit around like we used to. We're slowly falling out of contact with one another. And if you don't wipe that god damned look off your face, Leon, I'm going to splatter your cursed blood all over these walls!"

Solieyu had been glaring openly at Harry through most of his speech. The vampire slowly stood up and advanced on him. "We may be scattered. But what of you? Holing yourself up in here. Never coming out save for classes. Why are you so scared to return to Ravenclaw Tower?"

"Scared?" Harry asked. "Oh, don't you talk to me about being scared, Reinhardt. Given that all of you have bent over and taken anything that frog has forced on you, you don't have the *right* to be calling anyone else scared. What's wrong, Leon? Scared she knows? Scared you'll be exposed?"

Solieyu grabbed the front of Harry's robes, pulling him in close and hissing, "You don't know what being scared IS, Potter. I've had to live my whole life with the fear that I might be found out! Just what do you think would happen to me if the school found out I was a vampire?!"

Harry raised his eyebrows. "I don't know what being scared is? Did *you* fight Voldemort, Leon? Did you stand up and stare him down after he killed a friend of yours? Do you have nightmares where you can see what he's doing? Who he's murdering? How he's feeling? I do. And since you've stolen Tonks away from me, I don't have anyone there to comfort me when those nightmares wake me up!"

"Stolen Tonks away from you?!" Solieyu asked, his voice raising a pitch. "You *have* snapped! What the hell are you talking about?!"

"Ohh? The vampire isn't even aware of his own powers anymore?" Sneered Harry. "Come now, Leon. I know you've talked to me about your vampiric charm. How it was surfacing. Do you think I haven't noticed the throngs of girls following you around? Or how you've actively stopped being in public places when it could be helped? And you talk about me holing myself up? You're nothing but a bloody hypocrite, Leon."

"I love that you're talking about me like I wasn't here." Tonks said, her voice very quiet.

"I love how you can't seem to acknowledge the fact that you've been hit by his stupid powers!" Harry said, focusing a glare on the blue-haired girl. "I love how Leon refuses to even accept that it's happening. Poor ickle vampire can't control his powers so he pretends they aren't there. How bleedin' adorable."

"Shut up." Solieyu growled, a wild look in his eyes.

"Or you'll do what?" Harry asked, bringing a hand up to knock Solieyu's away. Stepping back and adjusting his robes, Harry then drew both wands, aiming them both at Solieyu's head. "I've faced Voldemort more times than I'd care to remember, Leon. I was up against him *and* every Death Eater than dared to return to him. And I survived. I took down a full grown dragon by myself. Or did you forget? What do you think *YOU* can do to *ME*?!"

"Ask yourself if you really want to know the answer to that." Solieyu said, smiling grimly.

"And what of Luna?" Asked Harry suddenly.

Solieyu blinked, caught offguard slightly. "What do you mean?"

Harry's gaze shifted to the blonde girl. "How do *you* see what's going on with your boyfriend?"

"...I think Solieyu is trying to come to terms with things he never asked for." Luna said after being silent for almost a minute. "I've tried to tell him that I don't care what he is. But..."

"But he's probably worried you're just affected by the charm powers he claims not to have?" Harry offered.

"I wouldn't put it that way." Luna said, fixing Harry with a scolding look. "But... yes. He's brought the subject up now and again."

"So tell me, Leon," Harry began, looking back at the vampire and lowering his wands. "Why are you so afraid of admitting you love her? Why continue to do this to yourself *and* her? Why won't you man up and learn to control your powers so the girls in this school can return to *normal*?"

"She knows how I feel." Stated Solieyu, eyes narrowing. "And there's nothing to control."

"...I see. Very well, then. Then no. I haven't snapped. This is apparently the *only* thing I can do. Because, apparently, the two people I thought were my best friends have stopped being close to me at all." Harry said, turning and walking into the main room.

He leaned against the back of the couch, closing his eyes and whispering to Boris, "*Why can't he accept what's happening? I want Tonks to stop fawning over him like all the other girls do.*"

"*Fear is washing off of him in waves, Harry. Give him time. And believe in Tonks. He won't give up and neither will she.*" Boris replied.

"I need them both right now. And I have neither." Harry hissed softly. Switching to English, he let out a sigh and murmured, "What other choice do I have, then, but to depend most on two Slytherins?"

"Oh, that's nice." Came a voice from the doorway.

Harry groaned, opening his eyes and looking up. Pansy was standing there, Malfoy a few steps behind her. "You have awful timing. You know that, don't you?"

"You realize I'll want an explanation." Pansy said.

"Well, come on in. Don't stand there with the door open." Harry said, pushing himself away from the back of the couch. "Hullo, Malfoy."

"Potter." Said Malfoy, looking as though he hadn't slept in a month.

As Pansy tugged Malfoy the rest of the way into the room and closed the door behind them, Harry began, "I'm sure you're wondering why I'd ask to see you."

"No, I'm wondering how the hell you managed to score quarters like this. What does that idiot Dumbledore let you get away with?" Malfoy asked, looking around with a disgusted look on his face.

"I call it the Snake Pit. Fitting, I thought." Harry said, smiling crookedly.

"So you wanted to see me and I arrive to see you holding two wands. That's a nice way of greeting someone." Malfoy said, crossing his arms.

"Hm? Oh, yes. Right. Terribly sorry. I was about to hex one of my idiot ex-friends into the ground just before you showed up." Harry said, gesturing towards the dining room, where the rest of the group was staring to get up and filter into the main room.

"Oh? Trouble within your own ranks?" Malfoy asked, smirk finally showing itself.

"More or less. So. Let's cut the bullshit and get straight to the point, shall we?" Harry asked, tucking his wands away. "I think you have an idea of why you're here."

"To some degree, yes." Malfoy said.

"I appreciate what you did." Harry started.

"A momentary lapse in judgment." Replied the blonde.

"Was it?" Harry asked. "I don't think it was. I think you saw what Voldemort was really like, how he treated his followers, and wanted no part of it. You saw what servitude to him was like. Think of how you treat your house elves, Malfoy. That is how Voldemort treats his Death Eaters."

Malfoy shifted slightly, glancing off. "Why do this, Potter? You realize I could betray you at the drop of a hat."

"I know you won't, though."

Malfoy laughed, turning to look at Harry again. "You know I won't? How can you believe in me that much?! I don't even believe in myself that much."

"Then don't believe in yourself." Harry said. "Believe in me who believes in you."

Malfoy stared at Harry for a moment before looking off again. Pansy came up and put a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged it away.

"Malfoy. *Draco*... I promise you that as long as I'm alive, you'll be safe. You can't honestly still be thinking of joining him. Not after what you've seen." Harry said.

Jerking his head up at Harry using his first name, Malfoy scowled. "It isn't my own life I'm worried about, Potter. My mother follows Lucius like a slave! She would walk behind him straight into hell without a single question. She's admitted as much to me. She's scared of him."

"She doesn't want to be a Death Eater, does she?" Harry asked.

"No. She's said that Lucius wasn't always like he is now." Malfoy said. "All she wants to do is live somewhere peaceful."

"I can make that happen." Harry whispered. "Because I have no intention of letting Voldemort win, Draco. And as long as you do the right thing, I can get your mother to safety. Somewhere that Voldemort can't reach her."

Malfoy's eyes narrowed. "...How?"

Harry simply smiled. Then, a moment later, he caused almost everyone in the Pit to jump by suddenly yelling, "**DOBBY!**"

With a loud *CRACK*, the eager house elf had appeared at Harry's side. Dobby looked up at Draco with an odd expression on his face before turning to look at Harry, who knelt next to him.

"Is Harry Potter sure?" Asked Dobby quietly.

"I'm sure, Dobby. Remember what we talked about last night." Harry said. "Whatever it takes."

Dobby bit his lower lip and wrung his hands for a few seconds, gaze darting between Harry and his former young master. "...If it is what Harry Potter wishes, then Dobby will be doing it, sir!"

"Good man." Harry said, grinning. "You said you knew where Dumbledore was, yeah?"

"Oh, yes, Harry Potter, sir. But Dobby is still not allowed to speak of the location!" Dobby said.

"That's fine, Dobby. Just so long as you can relay a message to him for me. Can you do that?" Harry asked.

Dobby gave a hearty nod, so Harry continued, "Good! Now listen closely, Dobby. This is very important. Go to him. Tell him I've formally requested him to collect and hide Narcissa Malfoy. Take her somewhere safe. Take her to Headquarters. Sirius and Andromeda might be interested in seeing her if they know she's jumped ship, so

to speak. Whatever he does, tell him to make sure that Voldemort cannot get to her. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" Dobby said. And, without another word, the house elf vanished with another loud *CRACK*.

Harry stared at the spot Dobby had been standing for a moment before sanding back up and turning to look at Malfoy, who was trying his best to hide the shock he was feeling.

"How the hell is our old house elf *here*?" Malfoy finally sputtered.

"I freed him. I'm sure Lucius ranted about that." Harry said. "He works here now. As a free elf, even. Strangely loyal to me for freeing him. It comes in handy from time to time. Dobby can do things I can't."

"You're serious about all this." Malfoy said, sobering up quickly. "About wanting me to join 'your' side. About fighting *him*."

"Too many people have suffered and died by his hands and those of his slaves, Draco." Harry said, stepping forward and extending his hand. "There are bigger things playing out than our stupid rivalry. Umbridge is going to slip up eventually. And when she does, I'm going to use it to remove her from this school. Without Dumbledore around, it's vulnerable. There's nothing keeping Voldemort from attacking."

"Not even you?" Asked Malfoy, smirking slightly.

"Not even me. ...Not yet." Harry said, glancing off to one side briefly. "There is... something I think I've worked out. But I need Dumbledore back for it to happen. And most of all, I need *time*. And time just isn't a resource I have these days."

"What of *them*?" Asked Malfoy, looking at the crowd of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws still standing just outside the dining room doors.

"*They* can accept my decision or leave." Harry said, his voice hard.

Malfoy looked back at him in surprise. "You'd choose me over them?"

"It isn't a matter of them over you or the other way around. It's a matter of them being too stubborn to admit what's really happening and adapt to it. If I have to fight Voldemort on my own, I will. But I'd rather have people I trust there with me. People I know won't abandon me." Harry said.

"How can you protect them if they're fighting with you?" Asked Malfoy.

"I can't, really. Not until I know I'm strong enough. And like I said - I need time for that to happen." Harry said, his hand lowering. "Things have been falling apart around me ever since Umbridge took control of the school. My friends are cowering before a frog's demands. My best friends won't admit that something's wrong. If I have to rebuild everything I've worked for, I need to do it now."

"Rebuild, huh? Not fix, but rebuild?" Malfoy asked.

"Leon is too pigheaded to accept he's the cause of the problem. And Tonks is too stubborn to admit she's being led on." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"In other words, the vampire can't get his stupid powers under control and your girlfriend won't accept the fact that she's under their influence." Malfoy stated.

Harry's eyes shot open.

"How did you--" Solieyu began.

"Know you were a vampire? Please. Do you think I'm stupid?" Malfoy asked. "The Von Eriksons, a family of vampires, are old friends of my mother. And they're all as tall as gaunt as you've become over the last few years. And do you think I've not noticed how the female population of the school seem to be following you like lost puppies? It would take an idiot not to notice what you are."

"Five points to Slytherin." Harry said, blandly.

"Trouble in paradise. Interesting. And the rest of them?"

"I don't know." Harry said, scanning the group. "But like I said... those who can't accept my decision can leave."

"I still don't understand why you're doing this." Ginny said. "Why offer him this chance?"

"Because he saved me." Harry said. "Malfoy wrote that letter. He's the one who warned me of the Dementors that would be coming for me. If it wasn't for him, my cousin wouldn't be the only one without a soul right now."

"I knew it." Tonks whispered, leaning back against the wall and closing her eyes.

"He's saved my life. I wanted a chance to issue the same offer to him." Harry said, looking back to Malfoy.

Malfoy was about to speak, but the loud *CRACK* Dobby made reappearing silenced him. Harry quickly knelt back down and asked, "How did it go?"

"Professor Dumbledore says he is happy to accept Harry's request. He is going to collect Mistress Malfoy soon. ...He is also saying that he sorry for not being here when Harry Potter is needing him the most..." Dobby said, his ears drooping slightly.

Harry smiled wearily. "Good. I'm glad to know he's alright. And I'm glad he's going to honor my request." Looking up to Malfoy, he asked, "I assume you'll want to wait to hear from her before you decide anything?"

"Optimally, yes." Malfoy said. "If she is taken to safety, she will contact me in some form. ...I suspect Lucius will then also contact me."

Standing, Harry walked over. "Fair enough. The password on the Pit's door will remain the same up through the end of the weekend. If Dumbledore doesn't act tonight, then he will tomorrow at the latest, I'd imagine. You'll know soon."

"If she is truly safe; if you've managed to tell me the truth, Potter... then I see no reason why I shouldn't choose to be on the winning side. I bow before no one." Malfoy said, raising his head and smirking.

Harry smirked in reply. "I'll wait on the handshake, then."

"Draco, we should get going. Being gone this long is going to be suspicious." Pansy said.

"Yeah. The less attention you draw to yourselves, the better." Harry said, hands sliding into his pockets.

"You're taking a huge risk, Potter." Malfoy said as he and Pansy headed back towards the door.

"Some things are worth the risk." Harry replied. "You're a smart person, Draco. You won't be on the losing side of this war. Both you and I know it."

"Very true." Malfoy said. "I'll stop by when and if I receive word from my mother."

"I'll be waiting." Harry said.

And with that, the two Slytherins left the Pit. Harry breathed out a sigh as the door closed, kneeling once more and smiling at Dobby. "Thank you. Really. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Harry Potter is a great wizard... it is an honor to be serving him!" Dobby said. "Even if it is to help my former masters."

"Did Draco ever treat you badly? Or Narcissa?"

"They was not kind to Dobby... but they is not as bad as Master Lucius was..." Dobby said, his voice going quiet.

"Right, best not think about him, then. Lucius will get what's coming to him, Dobby." Harry said. "Go on and rest. You've earned it."

Nodding, and giving Harry a smile to assure him that he was alright, the house elf vanished with a *CRACK* once more.

Harry stared at the spot where the house elf had vanished. A sigh escaped his lips. "This is what it's come to. Get out. All of you. I need time to think. So do all of you. I don't care how many of you come back or how many of you don't. All I ask is that the Pit remain hidden."

He stood, his tired eyes slowly scanning his people in front of him. They lingered on Tonks, who frowned at him. He then turned and faced Solieyu once more.

"Leon."

"What?"

"You're a special case."

"What do you mean?"

Sliding his hands back into his pockets, Harry offered the vampire a smile. "You don't get to come back."

"What?!"

"Your powers are out of control. Until you get a handle on them, or at least until you admit it's got you overwhelmed, you aren't welcome here. When Dumbledore gets back, I'm asking him to take you aside. I'm not sure what he can do to help, but I know he can. If you won't do it yourself, I guess I'll have to do it for you. One more thing on my mind. Thanks, Leon. I need my head as clear as it can be to try and fix this mess and you're just contributing to the problem. So leave. Now." Harry said.

"Make me." Solieyu growled, his eyes turning a transparent yellow color.

"...Don't say that." Harry whispered.

"**MAKE. ME.**" Hissed the vampire. "Or are you afraid? I'm faster than you, Harry. You realize that, don't you?"

Harry opened his eyes to look at Solieyu. The vampire was slightly hunched over and breathing heavily. "...You're already having trouble

standing. Do you want the rest of your curse to take hold? Is that it, Leon? What did you call it again? The Craving? Do you want that to take effect down here?"

"It won't." Solieyu said.

"You haven't had your potion in awhile. You're normally very hard to irritate. Is Madam Pomfrey fawning over you like Tonks is?" Harry asked, his voice taking a hard edge.

"I am not fawning over him!" Tonks cried, glaring at Harry.

"PROVE IT!" Harry yelled. "Stay *here* tonight, damn it! Stop going back to the damned Tower! Stop following *him* around!"

"With the way you're acting? Why *should* I stay here? So you can yell false accusations at me some more?" Tonks asked.

Harry brought a hand up to his scar, rubbing at it slowly. His barriers were falling. Fast. He wasn't sure he had the energy to put them back in place. He barely felt like he was holding his wild magic back as it was. "...Fine." He said eventually, turning his back on the group. "Fine. Don't stay. Stay with him all you'd like. I'll deal with things on my own again."

"Like how you dealt with them the night before I found you?" Tonks asked.

Harry faltered at that. After a moment's silence, he whispered, "Get out."

"Don't tell us what to do!" Solieyu growled.

Harry spun, digging the toe of his shoe into the floor to launch himself at the vampire, both wands being drawn even as he turned. Two quick flashes of light later and Solieyu found himself slung back and pinned to the wall with large, steaming spikes driven through the loose parts of his robes. Harry was pressed up against him, one wand jammed into the soft flesh under his chin, the other aimed at his heart.

Harry was visibly shaking now, his breath ragged. He had a distant, wild look in his eyes and, when he spoke, it was through clenched teeth. "I will tell you to do whatever the hell I want you to do, Reinhardt. I don't care how fast you are - I'll be faster. I don't care how strong you are - I'll be faster. I don't care what spells you use because I know worse! I'll cut you to pieces before anyone in this room can take a single step. I'll blow you apart like I was going to do to Moody! I'll rip your soul...!"

"**HARRY!**" Yelled Boris.

Harry clamped his mouth shut, forcing harsh breaths out through his nose. "...*He deserves it.*" He hissed eventually. "*He refuses to listen! SHE refuses to listen! I need her here! I need her to hold me! She's all that keeps me **SANE** anymore, Boris!*"

"*That is apparent.*" Whispered the snake. "*Calm yourself, Harry. How can you expect to be a leader to others when you're acting like you belong in an asylum?*"

"*I can't calm myself! That's the point of this!*" Harry roared. "*If he would be a man and accept that he's out of control, if he worked out how to control his powers... I could have her back then... You've heard me at night, Boris. Do you want me to start explaining to **you**, in great detail, what I see him do?!*"

"*I can imagine.*" Boris said. "*Necromancer's pet and all.*"

"He slays children." Harry said, not even noticing his switch back to English. "He defiles them in front of their parents. He cuts the parents open and makes the children watch as they lay there, screaming, trying to stuff their internal organs back in. He mutilates. He sends Dementors after them. He's collecting *souls*, Boris. And I see every second of it. Do you think any of these people would be able to take a single week of that, let alone the months I've had to? **DO YOU?!**"

"*English, Harry.*" Said the snake.

"Shit. Point stands, though." Harry said, lowering his wands and pushing himself away from Solieyu. Dispelling the bolts, Harry turned and started towards the bedroom. "I have no energy. I have to sleep

more and more. And that's what I see. I can't sleep because I have nightmares. I can't be awake because I'm living one, too. My closest friends may as well be on his side for all the good they're doing me. Draco Malfoy is closer to me right now than my own fiancée is. I wonder if any of you can imagine how terribly, horribly depressing that is."

Harry entered the bedroom and closed the door softly behind him. Once he was out of earshot, the group suddenly turned to Ginny, who had let out an odd noise.

"Ginny!" Hermione exclaimed, walking over to the redhead. "Why are you crying?!"

"You couldn't understand what he was saying. I could." Ginny said, her voice hitching as she spoke. Turning watery eyes on Tonks, she continued, "He said he needs you. Needs you to hold him. That you're all that keeps him sane... oh, you two are so *stupid*! Why can't you just admit something's not right?!"

Hermione tried to console the girl, but she broke away and walked towards the door out. Fred and George were quick to follow after her. Hermione watched them leave without another word, shaking her head slowly. "...You do need to get yourselves under control." She said quietly. "I can feel it too, Leon. Your powers. They radiate off of you. It's like an aura surrounding you. I could find the material you'd need to get it under control."

"I've already said..." Solieyu began.

"I see." Hermione said, cutting him off. "...Maybe Harry was right about you, then. I know he was right about the last thing he said. It would be terribly depressing to be closer to Malfoy than to the person you want to marry. I hope for his sake you two see the light. Because you're dragging Harry further away from it with every passing day."

She left after that, leaving Tonks, Solieyu, and Luna alone in the main room. Solieyu was about to say something when Luna latched onto his left arm. He turned to look at her, but she was staring down at the ground.

"Luna?" He asked.

"Are you going to give up on me, too?" She asked, her voice barely audible.

"Too'? Luna, I--"

"You have. You've given up on him. Didn't anyone else hear it in his voice? He was about to break down entirely in front of all of you. It's a very hard thing being alone in the world. I know that. You should, Solieyu. Above everyone else here, you should."

"Luna..."

"And you..." Luna said, lifting her head slightly to look at Tonks. "Do you not love him anymore?"

"Of course I do!" Tonks said.

"Maybe you should act like it, then." Luna murmured. "He's alone in the bedroom, probably crying himself to sleep because the girl he loves doesn't seem to love him anymore. He's probably gone to sleep like that since Solieyu's power made itself known. Didn't anyone find it strange that Harry, who spent a week of concentrated training to get good at Occlumency, was having his dreams invaded? If he were sleeping normally, even with all that's happened, surely he could have put up his mental barriers before drifting off. The only reason he should be seeing what Voldemort does if he falls asleep in a vulnerable state."

She let go of Solieyu's arm and brought a hand up to rub at her eyes, which had started to water as she spoke. "You two are so stubborn. But can't you get over it at least for a little while? He needs you. Both of you. And the lack of sleep and added stress of everything that's happened, both with Umbridge and with you two, nearly drove him to attack Solieyu. Doesn't any of that raise any flags or trigger any alarms in either of your heads?"

When the two other Ravenclaws remained silent, Luna slumped a little, turning for the door herself. "I'm coming back. And I'll sit and talk to him even if no one else will. Because he needs a friend right now.

He needs a shoulder to cry on. He needs to get it out of his system before he explodes. And... Solieyu? Until... at least until you patch things up with Harry... please don't speak to me. I'm just... I don't know if I can be with you right now."

Solieyu watched the blonde rush out of the room after that. He closed his eyes and let his head lean back against the cold stone wall. "...Are things really that bad?" He whispered.

"I..." Tonks began. "...What's happening to us? Leon, maybe you..."

"Don't."

"But..."

Solieyu pushed himself away from the wall. "Nothing's wrong with me. That's all."

"Leon. Please..."

But Solieyu said nothing else, leaving the Pit before Tonks could finish what she was planning on saying. Tonks stood there, alone, in the main room of the Pit. The only noise was the sound of the fire crackling. She looked across the room at the closed door to the bedroom. She shut her eyes and shook her head quickly. She needed to get out of there. She needed to go out and get some fresh air. Something, anything, so long as she didn't have to remain where she was.

She turned and, casting one final glance back at the shut door, walked out of the Pit.

Chapter 14 – Breakdown

The following day, Harry stalked out of the Pit at around six in the morning. Another strange nightmare had driven him from his slumber. That had been almost two hours ago. A fourth of that time had been spent talking to Boris in order to wrap his head around where he was and what was actually happening. Voldemort was planning something. Harry wasn't sure what that was yet, but it gave him chills thinking about the possibilities. Harry didn't want to even make wild guesses, as he had a bad tendency of being right in cases such as this.

The bags under his eyes were growing darker. He hadn't had a good night's sleep in ages. He was too distraught at night to effectively raise and maintain his Occlumency barriers. He knew he needed to try harder, but it was just too difficult. He had too much on his mind. The ability didn't help much at all when he was too upset to utilize it properly.

He made his way to the Great Hall out of a lack of anywhere else to go. He would be early by just over an hour, but he didn't care. The Great Hall wouldn't be crowded yet. He needed fresh air. He needed to be out of the Pit for awhile, whether he wanted to be or not.

He had a headache. It had been with him ever since he woke up. The nightmares always gave him terrible headaches. A few times, he had awakened to find his scar bleeding slightly. It was on those nights that he knew Voldemort was doing things. Though he tried not to think on the subject too much, he found it hard not to. People were out there being attacked, but it was strange... very few had been killed. At least, very few in comparison to the number that Voldemort had sent Dementors after.

The Dementors bothered Harry. He was very familiar with the soul-devouring monsters from the island prison of Azkaban, and yet the creatures from his dreams seemed... different. Voldemort was collecting souls for something. What worried Harry most was the almost complete lack of contact from the old man within the blue gemstone. That had stopped at roughly the same time that Voldemort had set his plan into motion, whatever it was. Harry hoped the two

weren't linked somehow, but he knew he wasn't that lucky. There had to be a connection.

Thinking of the gemstone only made Harry think of the Gauntlet, which still sat at the bottom of his trunk next to the shard of the Philosopher's Stone. Two parts of a greater whole. Dumbledore knew where the green gemstone was. Harry had been in contact with the blue gemstone and the soul trapped within, but had no idea where it was located. Even with Dumbledore's story of what had happened to the stonemason and his attempts at constructing the Gauntlet, Harry was dancing around with the idea of trying to assemble it himself.

He was different. He had an excess of magical power. His magical core was unique, after all. If he couldn't wear the thing, no one could. And he really had no idea how else he could fight against Voldemort. He needed a boost of power and he knew simply studying the Dark Arts and other offense-based spell books wouldn't give him the edge he needed. He wanted to reforge the Gauntlet. And right now, he didn't care much if there was a backlash. He really didn't have a lot to lose. Everything was being taken away from him bit by bit, so why not give it a try?

The only things stopping him were Dumbledore's absence and the lack of knowledge as to where the blue gemstone was located. Harry figured Dumbledore *might* be able to retrieve the green gem and get it to him via Dobby if he really wanted to, but that still didn't solve the other problem. Harry could only wait and hope that the soul trapped in the gem tried to contact him once more.

Arriving in the Great Hall, Harry was happy to see that he was the only one around. He went to the Ravenclaw table and sat at the end closest to the doors. Sitting down, he crossed his arms on the table and laid his head down. Letting his eyes slip shut, he wondered how soon Dumbledore was going to get Narcissa Malfoy to safety. Harry figured that, if the headmaster were to use Fawkes, he could easily get in, collect the woman, and get out. The sooner that Draco got confirmation and jumped ship, the sooner Harry could check one more worry off of his list.

Over the course of the following hour, people began arriving more and more often. Pretty soon, the din of several hundred students talking filled the air. Harry didn't much mind the noise, despite his headache. It helped distract him from his thoughts to a certain degree. So long as no one bothered him, he would be satisfied. No one bothering him and not having food spawn under his head, anyway.

Thankfully, most people took note of the look on Harry's face and left him be. Even the Slytherins didn't look like they wanted to start anything that morning. Harry finally looked around the room, noting that Draco wasn't around, though Pansy was. Solieyu and Tonks were further up the table. Interestingly, Luna was much further down from them. Harry wasn't sure what that meant. He would need to ask the blonde at some point what happened after Harry left the room the previous night.

Eyes drifting to the Gryffindor table, Harry could see that the girls seemed to be in better spirits than the ones from his House. The twins were joking around and irritating Ron as much as they could with Umbridge looming over them all. That seemed promising. Harry wasn't sure how many of them would return, but he hoped Solieyu did what he was told and kept the hell away. Harry had barely been able to restrain himself the previous night. And with as much as he had on his mind that morning, he was in no mood to be dealing with obstinate vampires.

When the food arrived, Harry stared at it for awhile. While he tried to show up in the Great Hall at least once daily, it was a very loose commitment to say the least. He hadn't been very hungry as of late, anyway. Plus, the Great Hall was getting a bit too packed for him. The noise was grating his frayed nerves now. Too many happy, stupid people unaware of the chaos unfolding around them! Did they not realize what was happening?!

Getting to his feet, Harry turned and headed out of the room, barely noticing that his moody exit had silenced a large area around where he had been. He didn't care, really. He was used to the idiots at Hogwarts being themselves. But their being idiots is why he had to continue pushing himself so hard. Each and every witch and wizard at Hogwarts, no matter their intelligence or lack thereof, deserved to

be saved. Christmas was going to cut a path through Slytherin House. It was going to get tense after that.

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, Harry abruptly turned and leaned his forehead against the cool, stone wall. He was over-thinking things. He needed to deal with them as they came. At least until things untangled themselves. At least until Tonks returned and he could get a good night's sleep. Harry wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't say no if someone else offered to just sit in the room as he slept. At least someone would be there to help snap him back to reality when the nightmares inevitably woke him up.

Pushing off from the wall, he continued his way back to the Pit. No matter his lack of sleep or mental state, he was always careful to ensure that no one followed him. This time was no different. He walked a few different places, stopped a few times to listen for footsteps and check for a magical aura nearby, and continued along. When he finally slipped through the invisible wall and headed down the short stairway, he felt more exhausted than he looked.

"Good morning. Back so soon?" Asked Levi as Harry approached his door.

"Yeah. The day hasn't gone well. Anyone stop in?" Harry asked.

"Just one." The snake replied.

Harry quickly gave the password and the door swung open.

"It's an odd thing," The voice from within the room greeted him with. "Having your world turned on its backside."

"Good morning, Draco." Harry said, closing the door behind himself and walking across the room to where Malfoy was sitting on the couch. "I assume you're here on business, then?"

Holding up a letter, Malfoy glanced aside at Harry as he rounded the couch. "Mother sent this. It arrived at four this morning. An hour later..." He held up a second letter. "And this came from Lucius."

"Just as planned, huh?" Harry asked. "So? Did Dumbledore get your mother to safety?"

"So it would seem." Malfoy said, blowing out a sigh and getting to his feet. "It says that she has arrived 'somewhere safe,' whatever that means. Apparently she isn't allowed to talk about it much."

"I'm pretty sure I know where she is. And if she's there, she's in good hands." Harry said.

"Yes, well, at least I know it's genuine. Lucius' handwriting, while eloquent as ever, takes on a distinctly shaky prose. He said that mother had seemingly vanished from the mansion. If Dumbledore managed to spirit her out of Malfoy Manor, then he's better than I've ever given him credit for." Malfoy explained.

"So. Your mother's safe and Lucius is pissed off. What of you?" Harry asked, hands sliding back into his pockets.

"I've sat here and thought about that." Malfoy said, tilting his head back and gazing up at the ceiling. "Answer one thing for me, Potter."

"Anything."

"How does 'your' side work? How do the 'good guys' operate?"

Harry closed his eyes and was silent for awhile before responding, "Our side mostly works in secret, as the Ministry is full of Voldemort's agents. Fudge is a doddering tit who wouldn't be able to find his own testicles if they were sliced off and presented to him. Dumbledore has a good number of people he trusts with running the real show. Not sure how large that group is these days. I only know of a couple handfuls of the people he's well-off with."

"In other words, your side is disjointed at best." Malfoy said.

"Mostly, yes. But we're not stupid. And we're not going to just lay down and accept what he's trying to do to this place and to our people. Unlike he and his Death Eaters, who are cowards, we would fight until the last man. Unlike his group, we wouldn't leave anyone behind. And distinctly unlike them, we do not treat those around us as

bumbling inferiors. Everyone is as equal as everyone else." Harry stated.

"Good in theory, rare to see in practice." Malfoy countered.

"True." Harry admitted. "But I've been to headquarters. I know what it's like there. Now, to be fair - let me ask *you* one question."

"As you wish."

"Do you really think Snape is working for Voldemort?"

Malfoy smirked. "Not really. Severus is too smart for that kind of thing. A spy?"

"Yeah."

"Figures. Well, if anyone could pull it off, it's him." Malfoy said.

"So where do you stand, Draco?"

"I'm not out of the woods by a good clip, you realize. Christmas is rapidly approaching. If I don't show up, everyone will know. Once that happens, I may as well start sitting with the Gryffindors. Nonetheless, you've kept your word, Potter. That means a great deal to me. I've spent the better part of the night awake and wondering just that, Potter. Where *do* I stand? My whole life, Lucius drilled into my head stories of his former Master and all of the glory they had tried to restore to the wizarding world..." Malfoy said, turning to stare at the fire.

"And you believed him?" Asked Harry, watching the blonde carefully.

"Every word of it. But, Potter, there comes a time in one's life when one gets a chance to see things as they truly are. This past summer was one of those times. I'm not deaf to the world around me. I heard what happened with you last year. What really happened with Moody?" Malfoy asked, turning to look at Harry again.

"He put my name in the Goblet. Turned the Cup into a portkey. I landed in a graveyard and bore witness to Riddle's resurrection. Lucius was there from the start, of course. Cedric and--"

"Not that part, Potter. What happened after he brought you up to the school? No one saw him after that and you were in the hospital wing next anyone heard."

Harry smiled grimly. "He explained what he had done. So I drove some spikes through his body, pinning him to the wall, and then I tried to kill him. Would've succeeded if Dumbledore hadn't arrived and thrown me to one side. All my spell managed to take out was the bastard's arm. Shame, that."

Malfoy smirked again. "Interesting to hear someone like you say something like that. I thought you were Dumbledore's little golden boy."

"You'd be surprised what I've thought about and done, Draco." Harry said. "Life isn't as simple as light and dark. There's a large grey area in-between. I've spent most of my life floating about in that part of things. I was initially upset with myself for wanting to kill Moody. Time has changed that. He deserved worse than what he got. As far as I know, he's still at St. Mungo's under close watch."

"Look at you two, chatting as though you'd been best mates from the start." Came a soft voice from the doorway. Harry and Malfoy turned to see Pansy stepping into the room.

"Did you hear the door open?" Harry muttered quietly.

"Not a damned thing." Malfoy replied. And then, addressing Pansy, he asked, "How do you *do* that, anyway?"

"I'm small and inconspicuous. You'd be surprised at how well I can sneak around." Pansy said, smiling sweetly as she walked over. "So, what were you two talking about when I slipped in?"

"The past. And the future." Harry said. "Care to join us? It's been a lovely conversation thus far!"

"You *really* need sleep." Pansy stated, stepping close to Harry and peering at him.

"I got enough sleep for one day, thank you." Harry muttered.

"So it would seem. Well, you caused quite an uproar when you left the Great Hall." Pansy said, moving away to lean against the back of the couch.

"Oh? What happened?" Asked Harry.

"Your precious little wench started to cry." Pansy said, an unmistakably happy tone to her voice. "The vampire tried to console her. Then Lovegood got up and left. Granger got up and ran after *her*. Nothing quite like dissension in the ranks."

"Fantastic." Harry muttered darkly, turning and staring at the flames dancing in the fireplace.

"Oh, don't sound so put-out. Lovegood looks like she's thinking up a really good rant to lay on Reinhardt. If anyone can get him to stop being a thick-headed idiot, it's her." Pansy spat.

"Draco, you're in the same House as her. Can you please explain to me her mood swings?" Harry asked, gesturing at Malfoy as he looked over his shoulder at Pansy.

"Personally, I think Pansy needs to just drag your oblivious ass into a broom closet and get it over with." Malfoy said, looking off and smirking. "It would stop her fro-- **OUCH!** Damn it, woman...!"

Malfoy rubbed his arm, which had just been hit by a stinging hex from Pansy, who was openly glaring at the blonde. Glaring and blushing, Harry noted, bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose.

"Not sure I want to know what that means." Harry stated finally.

"Really? Not even after she nearly cursed you and your girlfriend last year at the Yule Ball?" Malfoy asked, looking at Harry in amusement. "Good lord, Potter. And we're depending on *you* in this war?"

"Brain's too shorted out to do any heavy thinking right now, Draco." Harry grumbled.

"So go to bed." Malfoy said. "I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. And *you* need to be a *bit* more lucid."

"I *can't* sleep, Malfoy!" Harry yelled. "Because when I sleep and my mind won't work right, I can't properly use Occlumency to keep Riddle from showing me whatever he bloody well pleases! No one should have to see the shit I have! And yet everyone expects me to be some kind of leader for them! I have my own damned problems right now that I'd like to work out! The first order of business is making Leon be a damn man so I can have my girlfriend back!"

Malfoy and Pansy exchanged a glance.

"But until that happens," Malfoy began, sitting back on the couch, "You need to think of some way to get sleep. You can't expect potions to get you by, can you? There's a limit to how much one's body can take before it begins kicking back what it's given. You should be on good terms with Madam Pomfrey by now. Why haven't you asked for Dreamless Sleep?"

"He's probably too worried about addiction right now." Pansy said, her voice quiet.

"Mm. Yes. I suppose with how sleep deprived he is, it could be an issue. Still. There has to be a way for you to get an uninterrupted night's sleep, Potter." Malfoy reasoned.

"There's an order to things. I have to have Tonks with me. I need to know she's there. That safety lets me relax. Relaxing allows me to think clearer. Thinking clearly allows me to raise my Occlumency barriers which, in turn, keep any unwanted dreams out. I physically cannot sleep like I am now. I wake up every night from nightmares." Harry explained, running a hand back through his hair.

"Meditation doesn't work?" Asked Malfoy.

"Can't meditate. Too much in my head." Harry said.

"So stop thinking." Malfoy said.

"I'm a Ravenclaw! All I *do* is think!" Harry cried. "I think and I think and I try and work out how the hell I can get anything done! Umbridge isn't any closer to being sacked. Fudge is still making anyone related to the Ministry cover up Voldemort's return. My friends are acting like idiots. At least I have a good idea what side of the storm you're on now, Draco."

"So it would seem." Malfoy said. "Listen, Potter. Listen closely and do not repeat a single word I'm about to tell you. I have a reputation to maintain."

"Oh, this'll be good." Harry muttered to himself.

"Sing." Malfoy said firmly.

"Say what?"

"Sing."

"...What, *now*?" Harry asked.

"Yes, now. **NO**, you bloody idiot. When you're trying to sleep!" Malfoy said, looking exasperated. "Sing. Hum. Think about music. It's distracting. You'll have a song stuck in your head for a few weeks after, but it's good for trying to unwind. Mother told me it's what she did when Lucius was in one of his moods. Eventually I started to use it as well."

Harry stared at the Slytherin for a moment before shaking his head and heading towards the bedroom. "Yeah, okay. Brain's officially fried now. Draco Malfoy, singing *himself* to sleep. Huh-uh."

"Where are you going?" Malfoy asked, looking sour.

"To lay down. If I'm careful, I can rest without actually falling asleep. My eyes could do with being shut for awhile." Harry said, opening the bedroom door. After slipping inside, he turned and looking back at Malfoy. "...Thank you, Draco."

After the door closed, Pansy whispered, "Which part of today do you think he was thanking you for?"

"Both, probably." Malfoy murmured. "What of you, Pansy?"

"What *of* me?" Asked the girl.

"Go in there." Malfoy said. "Stay with him. Be with him. If he's to be our leader in this war, he needs to be capable of staying awake. He needs a good night's rest. A few days' worth, probably."

"He'd never let me." Pansy said, staring down at the ground.

"You don't know that." Malfoy said, tilting his head to look at the girl.

"I do so know it." Pansy mumbled. "He loves *her* too much."

"He also hates me too much to actively let me in on his secrets. And yet that's what he's doing. Taking a huge personal risk." Malfoy stated.

"Are you really on our side now, Draco?" Asked Pansy.

"Of course I am." He replied. "Can't let Potter get all the glory, can I?"

"Getting back at your father is just an added perk?"

"You could say that."

The two Slytherins sat in silence after that. When it was broken, it was by Pansy, who pushed herself off the back of the couch and asked, "Do you really think he'd accept me? Or would I just be a replacement?"

"If he lost the vampire, do you think I'd fill the void?" Asked Malfoy softly.

Pansy looked down, her shoulders slumping. "...The sad part is I'd still be willing to do it anyway. Knowing I'd just be a substitute. But I need to catch him at a better time. It's been tough for him, this last week or two."

"If you're going to do it, you'd better do it soon, Pansy. Who knows what might happen in the future." Malfoy said.

"Yeah..." Pansy murmured, her gaze lifting to stare at the bedroom door. "The future..."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry had spent ten minutes speaking with Boris before he lost his fight with consciousness. Boris was coiled on the nightstand on Harry's side of the bed, watching his master sleep. It wouldn't be for long, he knew. It never was anymore. He would begin tossing and turning.

His eyes would snap awake and, seconds later, he would jerk bolt upright in bed. A few times, Harry had said just how irritating that last bit was, as under normal circumstances, it was almost impossible to perform such a maneuver.

The taipan laid his head down, but kept himself alert. He would sense it before it actually happened. It was all a matter of time.

For Harry, the Pit may as well have been a million miles away. And, for all he knew, it very well could have been. He was in that strange, black room that he had seen once before. This time, however, only four rooms branched off of it, not six as there had been before. The pedestal still stood in the center of the room, though the blue gemstone laying on it was quite clean now.

"He is active..." Whispered an elderly voice. "He is active..."

"Who is?" Harry asked, stepping towards the pedestal.

"The demon. He walks these halls once more. He has increased how often I feed. Energy is building now..." The voice said. "I am growing stronger once more..."

"But who are you?"

Just then, a ghostly figure materialized beside the pedestal. It was that of an old man, his face wrinkled more than any Harry had ever seen. He had a beard longer than Dumbledore's and was nearly as

gaunt as Solieyu. His robes hung loosely on his frame. Though he was the same pale blue as the ghosts at Hogwarts, his eyes shone with a different light. They were brighter - stronger somehow. They were the same color as the gem.

"I am Balthazar Velmond." Spoke the spectral figure. "I was once a crafter of fine gems."

"You made the conduit gem." Harry said, looking down at the sparkling stone. "You used yourself as the sacrifice."

"I did." Said Balthazar, his eyes downcast. "I could not bear the thought of sacrificing an innocent man to fuel my friend's mad plan."

"Why even go through with it, then?" Asked Harry as he stepped closer. "Why go through with it at all?"

Balthazar smiled faintly. "Just as there is now, so too was a great evil stalking the lands then. We had little choice. My friend was foolish for thinking up the idea and we as well for following. But the Gauntlet worked. He had to destroy almost a hundred wands to invoke the power needed to fuel the process, but it worked."

"What do you mean? Where did he get that many wands?"

"I do not know. But I saw them. A massive amount if power is needed to forge the Gauntlet, you see. Sadly... once he had it forged, his magical core was consumed. The Gauntlet remained affixed to his body until he had decayed..."

"I'm sorry." Harry said. "It must have been painful to watch that happen."

Balthazar's head snapped up, staring at once of the exits to the room. "We haven't much time. The demon has returned to his lair." He looked back at Harry. "He is feeding me again. He has great plans for this place. Horrible plans."

"What's going to happen?" Harry asked, now glancing at the spot the old man had looked.

"He will rise above all others. A great shadow will fall across the lands. He will spread terror and destroy lives wherever he goes. Pain and misery will be left in his wake. You must save me. You must come and retrieve my gem from this place! Quickly! If he is allowed to complete his plans, the whole world may be in danger..." Balthazar said, his words spoken in a hissing tone.

"But where *are* we?" Asked Harry, his own voice lowering.

"Hell." Spoke the ghostly figure.

Before Harry could ask what he meant, the black world seemed to dissolve around him. It was hot now - a heat Harry had never felt before. He twisted around, trying to figure out what was going on. Empty blackness continued on in every direction, however. Try as he might, he couldn't force the emptiness to give way to anything.

And then, faintly at first then growing to ear-shattering levels, crying could be heard. A pained, otherworldly crying. The world exploded around him, erupting into flames and smoke. He was standing within a house engulfed in fire. He could feel the heat, but it did not cause him harm. But the sounds filling his ears - the horribly screams of people being immolated - were worse. Far, far worse.

Harry didn't want to look, but knew he had to. Three people were curled up together in one corner of the apparent kitchen they were in. The parents were sheltering their child from the flames, despite it being a futile endeavor. It was consuming them just as quickly as it consumed their house. A burst of light from above caught Harry's attention. Desperate to look away from the dying family, he jerked his head up. Through the multitude of holes appearing in the roof, a glowing, green skull had formed in the skies.

Clamping his eyes shut, Harry screamed, "***STOP! I DON'T WANT TO SEE THIS!***"

Harry felt a strong gush of wind blow past him, taking the heat of the flames with it. When he opened his eyes, he found himself once more surrounded in darkness. But he still had his footing. He was still capable of moving around. He tried in vain to let his eyes adjust, deciding he had to move, even if he couldn't see where he was going.

Slowly, he felt his way forward, unsure of where he was still. Despite being unable to see, this felt... familiar somehow. The familiarity was outweighed, however, by the creeping dread. This place was too silent - too *still*. It was a sharp contrast to the noise of the dying family and the feeling of flames dancing around him. Best as he could tell, there were no people at all here.

He left the building he was in only to tumble out and into the street. But there were no cars. There were no shops open. There were no street lights. The mere sounds of nocturnal animals and insects wasn't even present. Not even the wind would blow to help Harry try and establish some sense of direction in this place.

The only beacon in the darkness rose above the rest of the buildings, at the end of a long street. A small mansion of sorts with a light coming from a lone, upstairs window. It almost seemed to phase in and out of reality. Harry was having a hard time keeping track of it despite the fact that his eyes never left the spot once he had locked onto it. There was a vile fog growing around him. It seemed almost supernatural in and of itself. It wasn't being helpful, in any case, and only added to the feeling of dread that was still washing over him. It felt almost as if Dementors were surrounding him.

The hair on the back of his neck rose when the silence was violently broken. A siren, from somewhere in the distance, had started to go off. Loud and seemingly unending, it tore through the darkness like a knife. The window once more became visible and, feeling as though death itself was coming for him, he took off running.

The street was half destroyed, as though heavy objects had smashed into it and then subsequently been removed. Harry did his best to keep himself from tripping. He had long since tried to find his wand, only to realize that he had lost it at some point. Chills still ran down his back as he collided abruptly with a large, iron gate. He had made it to the front of the mansion. For once, it seemed as if luck was on his side, as one half of it was open. Once he pushed through it to enter the mansion's yard, the siren in the distance was cut off. The noise didn't wind down slowly, it had simply stopped dead.

There was nothing natural about this place, Harry decided. Something had cleared the town out. Something had removed all traces of life. The question was *what*. And if no one was around, why was the light upstairs on?

One of the two doors leading into the building was open. But unlike the gate he had just come through, this passage forward made Harry once more feel as though something was lurking just outside his field of vision. Though there was no wind to push it, the door swung back and forth slowly, as though rocked by some unseen hand.

Carefully making his way inside, Harry was met with an even stranger sight. The mansion, though it looked new from the outside, looked as if it should have been condemned and destroyed ages ago. Everything was black with dirt and rust, along with the unmistakable splatter marks that could only be made by blood.

He briefly considered his options. He could either take his chances back outside, in the fog, cold, and darkness... or continue pushing forward into the rusted, blood-soaked abode. Neither was particularly pleasant.

It didn't take him long to find the room with the light coming from it. He had made sure to glance up as he ran between the gate and the door. He was having trouble navigating the place however, as his feet kept piercing the rotted floor beneath him. Near the top of the stairs, he had almost snapped his ankle as his foot suddenly pushed through a step rather than come to rest on top of it.

A foul odor was emanating from the room, and Harry could hear a faint voice coming from within. Though quiet, it was a familiar, high-pitched tone. Harry's heartbeat quickened as he listened. He knew that voice. He had heard it before. Just once, in person. It was more than enough. If he never heard the voice again, it would be too soon. But he had come so far - he had to see what was happening inside.

Slowly reaching out, he took hold of the old, crusted-over doorknob and twisted it, pushing it open. Light flooded Harry's eyes, causing him to gasp aloud and clamp his eyes shut. Slowly, so as to allow them to adjust, Harry let them open once more.

He immediately wished he hadn't.

Humans, stripped of their skin, were hanging in the room, held up by hooks piercing their backs. Blood dripped from their bodies and pooled under them. A darkness in one corner that Harry had initially thought was merely a shadow caught his attention. Turning away from the gore before him, he saw a pair of black-clad figures kneeling next to a corpse that had fallen (or been ripped) from its hook. They seemed to be devouring it.

Just then, they stopped, as though they knew that they were being watched. They slowly turned and faced Harry, who took a step backwards. By all rights, they were Dementors. They *should* have been Dementors. But Dementors only had gaping voids for mouths. These... things, whatever they were, had large mouths filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth. The sunken, almost nonexistent eyes of the Dementors were replaced by dark holes with small, bright, red lights in the center. Blood dripped from their mouths.

Harry wanted to ask what the hell he was looking at, but he couldn't find the words to speak. Almost as if answering a small child's question, however, a voice rang out from another corner of the room. Turning his head, Harry saw the unmistakable face of Voldemort peering out from the inky darkness that was now filling the room.

"Do you like them, Harry? They are the first of their kind. They are Altered. They are the new face of nightmares. They will descend and they will feast as their brethren leave hollow shells in their wake. Immune to that which their weaker siblings are almost killed by, my little pets will soon make our dear Minister change his opinions on me." Purred Voldemort, his head turning to look at the beasts near the body.

Before Harry could respond, Voldemort's face split into a wide grin and he howled, "*KILL HIM!*"

Boris' eyes snapped open as Harry let out a strangled scream. The teen's eyes then opened as wide as they could and, before the snake could ask what was wrong, Harry had bolted out of bed, slammed the door open, and ran into the main room of the Pit.

Pansy and Malfoy had jerked their heads towards the bedroom door upon hearing the scream. When Harry came rushing out, heading for the bathroom, Pansy tried to ask what was wrong. But Harry didn't reply. Moments later, the sounds of violent retching could be heard from inside. The Slytherins exchanged a disgusted glance, but nodded anyway.

Harry was on the ground in front of the toilet, leaning against it to try and stop the shaking. Pansy stepped inside and knelt down next to him, rubbing at his back slowly. Malfoy stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, as he surveyed the ill Ravenclaw.

"Another nightmare?" Asked the blonde quietly.

Harry gave a weak nod.

"I won't ask what happened." Malfoy continued. "You were only out of the room for half an hour."

"Felt like longer." Harry croaked. "Voldemort's done something to the Dementors..."

"What do you mean?" Asked Pansy.

"He's changed them. Altered them. Dunno." Harry muttered. He made a gurgling groan before leaning over the toilet once more.

"This settles it." Malfoy said. "Pansy, watch him. I'll be right back."

"Be quick." Pansy said.

"Where...?" Harry muttered between gasps.

"You'll see." Pansy murmured. "Breathe, Harry. You're fine now. You're awake. Nothing can get you here..."

Slowly, Harry was able to scoot away from the toilet, leaning back against the bathtub and breathing slowly. Pansy sat quietly with him for ten minutes until Malfoy returned, a pair of small vials in his hands. He entered the bathroom and got on one knee.

"Drink." Malfoy ordered, holding out the first vial, which was filled with a watery, orange substance.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

"Something to quiet your stomach." Malfoy said. "I got these from Severus, before you ask."

"Kay." Harry muttered, uncorking the vial and downing its contents quickly. Thankfully, the taste was pleasant and didn't trigger any gag reflexes.

"Second one." Malfoy continued, holding out a vial filled with deep grey ooze. "This one will help you clear your head. Just a sip."

Harry nodded, taking a quick swig of the disgusting slop. He winced as he swallowed, making a gagging sound. "Oh god..."

"Yeah, sorry. Don't ask the ingredients. Okay, final one." Malfoy said, holding up a vial of neon blue liquid. "All of this one."

Harry nodded again and quickly downed the entire bottle. "What was it?"

"Dreamless Sleep." Malfoy said quietly. "Sorry, Potter, but you need to get some damned rest. Whether it helps your mental status or not, your body's got to rest."

"No!" Harry cried as soon as Malfoy spoke the name of the potion. "Damn it, Draco, I can't have Dreamless Sleep! I need to stay awake! I have to be able..."

But he didn't get to finish his sentence. The potion was strong and took effect almost immediately. He slumped to one side. Pansy caught his head before it cracked against the ground. Sighing, she looked over at Malfoy and asked, "Was that really the best thing to do, Draco? He's going to be mad when he wakes up."

"Yes, but at least he'll have his head on a bit straighter then. If we left him as he was, he would just become more and more irrational. No

one needs to go through that. Come on, help me levitate him back to his bed." Malfoy said, getting to his feet and drawing his wand.

The two Slytherins floated Harry back through the Pit, depositing him in the center of his bed. Boris, who had only caught bits and pieces of the conversation from across the quarters, stared at the two as they lowered Harry down.

"Don't worry." Pansy said, glancing at the taipan. "Dreamless Sleep. He'll be out for a good day with as much that was in there. It's for his own good."

Boris bobbed his head before turning it to look at Harry. He didn't approve of tricking the boy into taking the stuff, but Harry *did* need sleep.

"Let's go." Malfoy said. "Gotta make sure anyone that comes in stays quiet."

"Yeah..." Pansy said, watching Harry for a bit longer before turning and leaving the room.

Closing the door behind them, the two walked over to the couch and sat down. Malfoy stretched his arms out along the back of it, while Pansy gazed into the flames in the fireplace.

"What did you say to him?" Asked Pansy.

"Who? Severus? I told him the truth." Malfoy said, shrugging. "Guess he thought Potter needed help, too."

"Nice of him." Pansy murmured.

"Yeah." Malfoy agreed.

"...It's going to be a long day, isn't it, Draco?"

"Probably." Malfoy said, leaning his head back and shutting his eyes.
"Probably."

Chapter 15 – Through Snake's Eyes

Harry did not react well to Dreamless Sleep. Ever since the two halves of his core had merged, potions seemed to have a weird effect on him. He chalked it up to the inhuman nature of the bit Voldemort left with him. There was another reason he had refused Dreamless Sleep when the stress had begun to build. It started to wear off in half the time it should have. The down side to this was that it was still potent enough to force him to remain asleep. This meant that he couldn't wake from the nightmares. He had to sit through them until the potion wore off and he could bring himself back to consciousness.

He was going to *kill* Malfoy. And Snape would be getting *something* heavy flung towards his groin at high velocity. Tricking Harry Potter was not something that anyone on the planet would get away with.

When the haze from the Dreamless part of the potion wore off, Harry found himself once more in a black void. He knew he was asleep and thus should be capable of changing the world around him to suit his needs. A bit of concentrating and the main room of the Pit shifted into view around him. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. He walked around and sat on the couch. The flames that crackled in the fireplace were an electric green.

It was only a matter of time. He knew that. For a brief moment, he wondered how lucid he would be upon waking up. The first - and last - time he tried to take Dreamless Sleep, he had been out of it almost an entire day. And that was when Tonks and the others were still by his side. He wondered if either of the Slytherins planned to go get anyone else. Probably not. Malfoy might be wanting to prove himself further or something, Harry reasoned. Showing Harry he could be trusted.

While he waited for the nightmares to take control, Harry thought back to the last sleep he had gotten. The gemstone had called out to him again. It formed a body and given him a name. But the location was still a mystery. And yet Harry couldn't help but feel he knew where it was. It was on the tip of his tongue and wouldn't come out for some reason.

Balthazar. The jewelcrafter who had created the two gems. The man who had sealed himself into the conduit gem. If Harry reforged the Gauntlet to fight Voldemort, what would happen? Would he be able to contain the power? Surely he could. He was Harry Potter, after all. If he couldn't beat the odds, no one could. He had even thought up a solution to the power needed to perform the forging. The only problem with his idea was that Dumbledore might not be too willing to go along with it. And he really needed Dumbledore around when the time came. He didn't want to be alone when he made the attempt.

The power behind a hundred snapped wands couldn't be achieved easily. And Harry still wasn't too sure if his plan would work. He didn't know how powerful *it* was. And that was a distinct problem. Maybe once he thought of a way to boot Umbridge from Hogwarts. Maybe once Dumbledore had returned.

There was the sound of fizzling coming from behind him now. The potion was wearing off. His dream was dissolving into another endless nightmare. He closed his eyes and started to breathe deeply. He knew it was a futile effort. He had tried prepping himself in the past, but it was all in vain. He had yet to become desensitized to Voldemort's horrors. Part of him knew that as long as he remained repulsed, he would never stray from his path. Part of him wished that he *could* become desensitized as it meant being able to sit through the hell that Voldemort put him through.

Harry's eyes opened wide at that thought. Hell. Voldemort was putting him through hell. The Dementors were collecting souls. The gem was becoming lucid.

Shit.

Harry got to his feet and began pacing in front of the couch, which was rapidly melting away. The conduit gem was in Azkaban. It had to be. The souls being collected were somehow being fed to Balthazar's gem. It, in turn, was reviving. Voldemort planned to utilize the conduit gem somehow. What did he say? That Voldemort had 'great plans' for Azkaban? Well what the hell did that mean? He already had dominion over the Dementors. What other plans could he...

No. No, that couldn't be right, Harry thought, his pacing coming to a sudden halt as his brain began to work overtime. Balthazar had said Voldemort would rise above all others and that a great shadow would fall across the lands. There was very little to be taken from that. The only thing Harry could think of didn't make any sense at all. But if it was true - if that was what Voldemort was planning...

Harry wouldn't be able to stop him if he succeeded.

Voldemort wanted to make Azkaban fly.

Running a hand back through his hair, Harry quickly sat down on the floor, which had almost completely vanished. The only way Voldemort could lift Azkaban out of water was with an immense amount of power. If he was feeding the gem souls to awaken it, he must have had some inkling of knowledge about what it did. If he were to power up the conduit gem and channel his magic through it...

"Crap..." Harry muttered. "If he lifts Azkaban, the Dementors will be able to swarm out from the sky. Death from above. ...Oh no. Ohhhh no no no..."

The altered Dementors from his last nightmare.

"So... wait. He's changed the Dementors, he wants to make the island airborne... oh, this keeps getting worse. Gonna assume he *has* changed them. Or *will* be soon enough. We've got to get over there and get the gem before he has a chance. I've got to get word to Dumbledore. I've got to..."

He was cut off when a bright white flash filled the dark void. He was standing in an old looking kitchen. There was a long table surrounded by numerous chairs. Harry looked around, finding an attached living room, which he slowly walked into. Nothing seemed out of place yet. So why was he here?

The living room looked very worn, as though the people living here had done so for many generations. This was all very familiar, but for the life of him, he couldn't place why. There were stairs nearby, so he decided to try going up them. But the minute his foot touched the first step, his vision was no longer his own. He couldn't explain what was

going on. The world around him had faded. And when it reappeared, he was very low to the ground. He was moving, though he knew he wasn't in his own body. This begged the question of where he was.

It didn't take long for him to work out whose eyes he was seeing through. Low to the ground and moving in a distinctly snakelike way. Harry was well aware that Voldemort had a snake - Nagini - because she had been in some of the nightmares. Harry wasn't sure if he was seeing through Nagini's eyes or whether it was just some random snake Voldemort had tapped to do his bidding.

Unable to do anything more, Harry went along for the ride. The snake had gone up one flight of stairs and was closing in on an opened door. Most likely a bedroom, Harry assumed. It did indeed turn out to be a bedroom. And judging from the noise, someone was fast asleep, unaware of the danger stealthily creeping up.

The snake managed to get up onto the bed. It was big. Bigger than Harry had assumed. There was a lone man in the bed, his back turned to the snake. By some twist of fate, he happened to roll onto his back just as the snake closed in.

Harry knew this man. Knew him well enough to begin struggling against whatever magic held him in place. He had devised a brutal way of waking himself up and, so far, it worked against any type of dream he had been locked up in. The only downside was that it did a tremendous amount of damage to his body. But he had no choice. If he didn't force himself to use the trick, wake up, and warn somebody, Arthur Weasley was going to die!

"I know you can hear me!" Harry screamed mentally, calling out to his merged magical core. "Wake me up! I know the risks! I know what will happen! I'm requesting the Exterminata Dementis be invoked! WAKE. ME. UP!"

Harry's world exploded into light, which quickly gave way to pain. He let out a choked gasp as he was forced into an awake state once more. Remembering what he had done, he rolled onto his side and started coughing up blood onto the floor. Once he was sure it was clear, he hopped out and drew his wands. He was bleeding from every hole in his head and then some. He felt nauseous and weak, as

though he were about to collapse at any moment. It didn't matter. He had promised not to do it anymore, but in cases such as this, his own safety wasn't important. He had used dangerous magic to awaken and now he was forcing his barriers back up so he could once again shut off his sense of pain.

He was still banishing blood from his face when he opened the bedroom door. Pansy and Malfoy were still around and both looked over, surprised, when he emerged.

"Potter, what the hell happened to you?" Asked Malfoy, quickly standing up.

"Arthur Weasley is in trouble." Harry said through gritted teeth. Used bad magic to wake up. Not healthy. Shutting down pain receptors with Occlumency training. Help me get to the Transfiguration classroom. Quick!"

A quick exchanged glance and the two were at Harry's side. Classes were in session, thankfully, which made the journey less dangerous for the Slytherin duo. When they drew closer to the Transfiguration classroom, Harry said he could make it the rest of the way on his own, saying it was dangerous enough for the Slytherins to be lingering near him. He quickly turned and ran for the classroom, trying not to think about how badly he was going to be torn up once he lowered his barriers again.

He knocked urgently on the closed door to the class. When McGonagall's voice called out to enter, he did so.

"Potter? What's this about?"

"Professor, I think something bad is happening. Someone's in danger..." Harry panted.

"Danger? Potter, what are you talking about? Who's in danger?"

"Arthur Weasley." Harry said, looking the woman straight in the eyes. He had never gotten along with the woman much, but he knew she was as reliable as Dumbledore was. "Can't explain how I know in front of everyone, I just do. Please, Professor. There's a gigantic

snake that was about to bite him. Probably has by now. Dunno where he is, but there was a lot of stairs."

Professor McGonagall eyed Harry strangely for a moment before nodding. "Class, continue reading chapter 11 on your own. I shall be right back."

With that, the Transfiguration teacher went into her office at the back of the room. Harry closed the door behind him and leaned against it, still panting heavily. This was taking a lot out of him. He knew people were staring at him instead of doing what McGonagall had told them to. 'Hang them,' he thought, 'this is more important.'

Nearly five minutes later, McGonagall re-entered the room, looking grave.

"How is he? Was he alright?" Asked Harry as soon as he saw the door open again.

"He has been taken to St. Mungo's." McGonagall said, her voice very clipped. "He had indeed been attacked by a snake. One that I have been assured is quite dead now. It was taken along for analysis."

Harry felt his blood run cold. "But is he *okay*?"

"I don't know, Potter. They believe they got to him quick enough that any damage can be reversed." McGonagall said. And then, turning to address her class, she continued, "I am afraid class is canceled for the rest of the day. Finish reading chapters 11 through 15 and write two pages on how bone structure is altered during the Transfiguration process."

Harry walked towards her desk as the rest of the students, a bunch of fourth years, quickly left the classroom. Once the door had been closed behind the last one, Harry asked quietly, "Order or Aurors?"

"Both." McGonagall said. "Arthur has been working almost around the clock. We had to order him to go off and get some sleep. He should have stayed at headquarters, but he chose to go home, claiming that it was more relaxing and that he would be more apt to drifting off there."

Harry bit back a swore, leaning forward against the old woman's desk. "Had a nightmare. A vision. Been having them awhile. I can see what Voldemort does. Or anything under his control, apparently. Saw through the eyes of the snake. Had to force myself awake through Dreamless Sleep that was wearing off. Had to... had to cut off pain with Occlumency. Not in such great shape right now, Professor... but I had to get here..."

"It is appreciated, Potter." McGonagall said. "Go and sit down. Try and relax. Arthur's life may yet be safe. We will have to wait and see. I'll refrain from asking how you woke up through such a strong potion or where you got it for now."

"Thank you." Harry said, wobbling over to a desk and flopping down at it. He crossed his arms on it and laid his head down, letting out a low groan as he slowly began lowering his barriers. "M'gonna be useless for awhile. Sorry, Professor."

"Quite alright, Potter. I'm going to go round up the Weasley children and take them to St. Mungo's. You sit and recover as long as you feel like, but I want you to go straight to the hospital wing as soon as you can walk steadily again. Understand?"

"Yes, Professor." Harry mumbled, letting his eyes slip shut.

"Good." McGonagall said, quickly walking out of the room.

A few minutes after she had left, the door opened again.

"Well?" Came Pansy's voice. "What happened?"

Without lifting his head, Harry murmured, "Mr. Weasley was bitten. He's at St. Mungo's. Dunno if he'll be alright or not yet. McGonagall went to get the other Weasleys an' take them over there..."

"And you?"

"Tired." Harry whined.

Pansy smiled, walking over. "Come on. Let's get you back to the Pit."

Harry let out a long-suffering groan before he forced himself to stand. "I'm gonna be a wreck when we get there."

"That's quite alright." Pansy said. "No one'll see you vulnerable. Draco's already back there, waiting. I'm sure the Weasley kids will pay a visit after they know how their father is, so try not to worry too much. You've done all you can. Let the medical staff do the worrying now."

"M'Harry Potter. S'my job to worry." Harry mumbled.

Slowly, the two made their way through the mostly-empty corridors back to the Pit. It took longer than Harry would have liked, but at least no one stopped them or questioned why Harry and Pansy were walking together. Malfoy was sitting in a corner of the room, scanning through one of the books Harry had nicked from Grimmer.

"How you got ahold of any of these is beyond me." Commented the blonde as Pansy helped Harry over to the couch. "Even my family didn't have access to some of these."

Harry leaned against Pansy for support as soon as they were both seated, something which the girl did nothing to rectify.

"So, what happened?" Asked Malfoy.

Pansy gave him a quick recap and he seemed satisfied, returning to his reading. Harry, meanwhile, was having trouble keeping his eyes open. Forcing himself awake and then exerting himself to such an extent had taken a massive toll on his poor, tired, stressed body. He decided to just get it over with in one fell swoop, like tearing a bandage off quickly rather than slowly.

"Owwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwwww!" He cried,
doubling over. "Oh god, that hurts..."

"You'll be okay." Pansy murmured. "Just rest for once, you idiot. Look, use my leg as a pillow and just go to sleep! There should be more than enough of that potion coursing through you to keep you out."

"Nightmares." Mumbled Harry, doing as Pansy asked despite knowing what he was throwing himself back into.

"I'll keep them away." Pansy whispered, lightly brushing her hand through Harry's hair as he rested his head on her leg. "As best as I can, I'll keep them away."

"Kay." Harry mumbled, his voice going quiet. "...Parkinson?"

"Hm?"

"Wintergreen." Harry giggled groggily. And that was that. He was out like a light, his body going limp in a matter of seconds.

Pansy grinned at him and sighed wistfully as she gazed down at him. "Idiot."

"You do smell like wintergreen, you know." Malfoy commented.

"Well aware of that, Draco." Pansy said, still stroking Harry's hair slowly. "I'm glad he decided to go to sleep."

"He's had a rough day." Malfoy said, closing the book on Dark Arts down and looking over. "We'll have to try and silence anyone who comes in, you know."

"What's this 'we' stuff? I'm busy." Pansy commented.

"Yes, yes, you and your baffling love of our hero. I'll silence anyone who comes in making noise, then." Malfoy said, rolling his eyes.

"Much better." Pansy said, grinning.

"The weasels will be arriving before anyone else, I'd imagine." Malfoy said. "Though you never know. Word spreads fast at this school. Could be anyone, really."

"Let's hope it isn't Granger." Pansy said.

"I'd need your help if it was." Malfoy said, making a face. "I alone wouldn't be able to answer her questions fast enough."

But no one turned up. Not for many, many hours. Night had fallen before the Pit's door opened again. Pansy looked over her shoulder and Malfoy glanced up from the book he had been lost within for the past few hours. It was the three Weasley children who knew of the Pit's existence. Malfoy brought a finger to his lips to indicate that they should be quiet.

"Potter's sleeping on the couch." Malfoy added in a quiet voice. "Let him rest. He damn near killed himself to wake up in time and get to McGonagall."

"What?" Ginny asked.

"Best as we could tell from his near-incoherent ramblings en route to McGonagall's class, he has a way to break from his nightmares. Does a heavy number on his body. I've gone in the bedroom since he fell asleep. Blood all over the bed itself and the floor. Probably vomited up. He was cleaning his face up when he came out and asked us to help. After he told McGonagall and she left to collect you lot, Pansy went in and helped him back here. He's been asleep since. Remnants of the Dreamless Sleep still working on him." Malfoy explained.

"He pushed himself that hard to save dad." Fred said, looking over towards the couch.

"We owe him a lot for this." George added.

"If you want to repay the debt, just be his friends. He needs someone here for him. And since my dear cousin and the vampire refuse to..." Malfoy trailed off.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course." Fred said. "Dad's gonna be fine. They messed with the snake for awhile - giant thing, too - and figured out how to whip up an antidote. Aurors said it was mid-bite when they showed up."

"Much longer and the amount of venom pumped into him would've been too much." George finished.

Ginny walked to the couch, peering over the back. Looking at Pansy, she whispered, "Has he had any nightmares?"

"None." Pansy murmured. "Thankfully."

"Yeah..." Ginny agreed. "We can't stay long. Just getting our things and telling our friends dad's okay. Wanted to come down here and thank Harry."

"Thank him by returning." Malfoy said. "Go on. We'll tell him you came by whenever he wakes up."

"Thanks, Malfoy." Fred said.

"Might have to rethink our stance on you after all." George added, a faint smile forming.

"Apologize for the pranks and we're even." Malfoy said dryly, lifting his book back up.

The twins chuckled and headed for the door. Ginny was soon to follow. Malfoy blew out a sigh as they left and looked over to Pansy. "One less thing for Potter to worry about."

"Hopefully with this sleep, he'll be back to normal." Pansy said.

"Doubtful. A few hours of sleep can't fix what he did to himself today. When he wakes up, he's going to be just as tired as when he fell asleep." Malfoy said. "You didn't see what I did in that bedroom. The pillow was practically drenched in blood. One night's sleep won't help you recover from what was effectively a hatchet to the face."

"I know, but... still..." Pansy said, looking down at Harry's peaceful form, in the same exact position he had been in since he had fallen asleep. Pansy's leg had long since fallen asleep as well, though she didn't dare move. Her leg would be fine for awhile yet. Harry needed the rest.

"I know. He'll survive. If there's one thing Potter can do, it's survive." Malfoy said. "He has an interesting ability to get out of tight spots

without suffering too much damage. Only this time it's all mental and very little physical. Aside from today, I mean."

"At the very least, he has three of his friends back. Plus us. A good start." Pansy said.

"True. Now if the others would come to their senses. Perhaps the weasels will spread the word that I'm not going to hex anyone into oblivion before running to the Dark Lord." Malfoy said.

"So what do we do now?" Pansy asked. "Bring me a book, would you? Something light. Much as I'm enjoying this, it's boring staring at the fireplace."

"Tired of gazing on your golden boy's sleeping visage already?" Malfoy asked, smirking as he stood up and perused the bookshelves.

"Shut up, Draco." Pansy scowled.

"Temper, temper, Pansy." Malfoy said, grinning. He chose a book on poetry and walked over to the couch. "Will this suffice?"

"Nicely. Thank you." Pansy said, taking it and flipping it open.

Malfoy returned to the corner and picked his own book back up. It had been a long day, and there were still a few hours to go.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

At around ten that night, Harry's eyes opened again. Slowly at first, he had to blink owlily a few times before taking in his surroundings. Turning his head, he saw a highly amused Pansy Parkinson smiling down at him. Groaning quietly, Harry hefted himself up into a sitting position, popping his neck to either side before stretching.

"How long've I been asleep?" He asked, coughing soon after.

"Better part of the day." Pansy said, stretching her left leg out best she could so it would start waking up. "The Weasleys stopped by. Their father's going to be okay, apparently. They got to him in time."

"That's good." Harry said, slumping back and closing his eyes again. "Sorry about your leg, by the way."

"It'll be alright once it wakes up." Pansy said. "How're you feeling?"

"Thirsty. Tired still." Harry said.

"'Just woke up' tired or 'Still stressed out' tired?" Pansy asked.

"Still stressed out." Harry muttered. "It'll probably be awhile before-- wait."

"What is it?"

"...I didn't wake up." Harry said, eyebrows raised.

"Ooh, very good, Potter. I can see why you were sorted into Ravenclaw!" Pansy said, earning herself a groggy glare from Harry. She grinned back.

"I mean due to nightmares!" Harry said, rolling his eyes at the girl. "That hasn't happened in awhile..."

"Complaining?"

"Far from it." Harry said, tilting his head slightly. "Just... not used to sleeping normally after so long. ...Where's Draco?"

"Gone to bed. About twenty minutes ago." Pansy said.

"We're going to have to keep him down here around the end of the holiday..." Harry said. "I don't want him going back to his House's rooms for awhile."

"He'd never agree. Draco's strong enough to keep himself safe." Pansy said.

Harry was silent for awhile. Eventually, he turned, casting a curious look at the Slytherin. "Why'd you let me sleep so long? Your leg must be hurting."

"You needed it." Pansy said. "You really, really needed it."

"Yeah, but--"

"No buts. Look, Harry... I know I can't replace her." Pansy said, staring down at the floor now. "I know that. But... you need sleep. More than what you got here. I could stay in there with you. Even if it just to sit next to the bed. I kept the nightmares away, didn't I? So..."

"Pansy."

"Yeah... yeah, I know. Stupid idea. Sorry."

"I didn't say that." Harry said, slowly.

Pansy looked over. Harry had his hands clasped together on his knees and was staring at them. "...I do need sleep." He said quietly. "Desperately. But... I don't know. I just don't know if I can do that. It would betray her tr--"

"Hang her trust!" Pansy yelled, causing Harry to jump suddenly. "She's done nothing but betray yours, so why not?! Why *can't* you betray hers?! Let *her* know how you feel for once! You're going to get sick if you keep this up! Is that what you want? To be bedridden when the Dark Lord finally makes his move?!"

"Pansy..." Harry said, looking over at the girl. "I'm... hell, I don't know. I don't know whether I'm coming or going lately. This is something I'll need to think about. You understand, don't you?"

Pansy stood up. "No. I don't, Potter. If I can help you sleep, why not? Not like I'm asking to have sex with you. I just want to be near you so you can sleep."

"No added benefits for yourself, I'm sure." Harry said, glancing off.

"You're such an idiot, Potter. You know that?"

Harry looked back. "That's a fine thing to say to a person you want to sleep with."

"Sleep, Potter. That's it. Nothing more." Pansy said, turning away. "Can't you even give me that much?"

"I don't know." Harry answered. "I really don't. I asked her to marry me, Pansy. I'm sure once Leon gets himself under control--"

"Am I not good enough?" Pansy whispered.

Harry looked at the girl for a moment before getting to his feet. "I didn't say that either. Look... it's... I need time to think. I slept most of the day, so I'm going to be up all night one way or another. Can you at least give me until Christmas?"

"...Sure. Why not? I've waited this long. What's another week or two?"

"Thanks." Harry said, stepping over and hugging the girl from behind. Pansy was shaking faintly. "...Are you crying?"

"No." Pansy said, lowering her head. "Slytherins don't cry."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Harry murmured.

"Just promise me, Harry. Promise me you'll have an answer by Christmas." Pansy said.

"I promise." Harry said. "I'll give them an ultimatum. Either they get control over themselves or I move on without them, whatever that entails."

Tugging herself out of the hug, Pansy turned and looked into Harry's eyes. "...Thank you. Think I'll go ahead and go to bed, then."

Harry nodded. "Take care, Pansy."

"...Harry?"

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, too."

"For wh--"

Harry's eyes shot open as Pansy closed the distance between them, her lips pressing against his. The shock of it kept him from pulling away. When Pansy finally did, he found himself unable to say

anything. It was just as well, as Pansy didn't look like she could either. With her eyes shimmering openly now, she mouthed another apology before turning and running out of the Pit. Harry stared at the door long after she left before finally raising a hand to his lips.

"Oh."

Everything fell into place at that moment. Why she had always acted so weird to him, why she had gotten so upset at the Yule Ball, why she wanted to stay with him to ensure he slept. It all made sense now. He closed his eyes and sighed, wondering how on earth someone as stupid as he was could have ever made it into Ravenclaw.

Shambling towards the bedroom, he drew his wand to clean up the mess he had made upon his forced awakening, only to find things perfectly clean. He blinked, walking closer to make sure he was seeing things correctly. "...Who did this?"

"Draco Malfoy. While you were asleep." Boris hissed.

"I'll have to thank him for saving me some work." Harry said, putting his wand away and flopping down on his bed.

"You seem distraught. Moreso than usual." Boris said.

"Pansy kissed me. Again." Harry said.

"I see."

"She kissed me a couple years ago, too. Unless my memory's gone bad on me from lack of sleep, I think she actually gave me my *first* kiss..." Harry admitted.

"It sounds as though she has cared about you for a long time."

"Yeah... and my idiot self is only just now realizing it. She kept the nightmares away when I slept out there, Boris. What does that mean?"

"It means whatever you think it does, Harry. Perhaps you simply feel safe around her, thus you're able to relax."

"Yeah, but... I definitely wasn't able to raise my barriers before I fell asleep..." Harry said, brow creased. "Explain why I didn't wake up screaming like usual."

"I can't, I'm afraid. What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I told her I'd give her an answer no later than Christmas. About her offer to stay in here with me to see if it actually does help me sleep better. If Tonks won't come back..." Harry trailed off, closing his eyes.

"You want to be able to sleep, but you don't want to hurt Parkinson's feelings by merely using her." Boris said.

"Yeah."

"Follow your heart, Harry. That's the only advice I have to give you right now. This choice is far too important for me to make for you."

"Boris?"

"Yes?"

"It's gonna be a long night, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Chapter 16 – Killing Loneliness

Time passed slowly until the Christmas holiday began. Tonks and Solieyu had both gone home for it. Neither had told Harry. The Weasleys, obviously, had gone home to spend time with their parents. Arthur had made a quick recovery thanks to the staff at St. Mungo's and Harry's speedy warning. Luna had gone home, which didn't surprise Harry much. She and Solieyu had been having a rough time of it as of late. Hermione, who didn't have any real reason to linger about, went to stay with her parents, who still didn't seem to quite get the whole magic thing.

Malfoy had stayed behind, though this obviously wasn't met well by some of his Housemates. There had been a tremendous fight in the Entrance Hall the day before everyone was to head home. Malfoy had taken a fair beating from six of the older Slytherin students. Whether he let himself take it to appear weak or whether he genuinely couldn't fend off that many attackers on his own was anyone's guess. Harry didn't plan on asking, certainly. A bit of friendly sparring to check the blonde's current level wouldn't be a bad idea.

Pansy had been avoiding Harry for the most part. She looked about as good as Harry felt anymore. Bags had started to form under her eyes, due to lack of sleep, the issue with Harry, and worry about what would happen to her now that she had stayed at Hogwarts and cemented her side on the inevitable war that was approaching.

Harry still had nightmares. Balthazar hadn't reached out to him since the last time, which left Harry worried about how close to completion Voldemort's plan was. The Pit was almost completely empty now, with almost everyone home for the holidays. Harry spent much of his time reading and thinking. There was a lot to think about now. If nothing else, Pansy had helped focus him. His thoughts weren't as wildly out of control as they once were. At least, not when he was staring at something. A book, the fire, anything so long as it wasn't the quietness of the room. He still couldn't form his Occlumency barriers before going to bed.

A few days before the break began, Harry had approached Tonks and Solieyu, telling him what he had told Pansy. If they couldn't get

themselves together, grow up, and get stronger, then he was going to leave them behind. Tonks seemed steely-eyed at this and Solieyu just looked angry. It was the last time Harry had spoken to either of them. Neither had come by to comment, which lead Harry to make a very difficult choice. Did he continue to wait, showing that his ultimatum had no weight behind it, or did he do as he said he would?

Moving on meant leaving four and a half years of memories behind him so he could focus on the future. It meant that every night of comfortable sleep, every day getting to spend with Tonks, every time he had made her laugh... it meant leaving it all behind. All because they couldn't see reality for what it was. Harry had tried researching vampires, but came up empty in regards to counteracting the vampire's veela-like charm.

The students of Hogwarts actively got out of Harry's way now. He skulked through the halls so much that he could have passed for a younger Snape if he tried a bit more. Now that the break had begun and the two Slytherins had made their decision, it wasn't as dangerous for them to be seen talking. At least not until everyone else returned. Very few stayed at Hogwarts that year. Too many killings being reported. Harry wondered, not for the first time, how many of his friends he would never see again once the holidays were over.

It wasn't the whispering about Harry that bothered him, really. Usually he just blocked it out. People had talked for him in secret for almost five years now, after all. But they were starting to come up with ridiculous nicknames for him now that he was getting moodier and paler. It didn't help that Fred and George had helped out, spouting nonsense like 'The Dark Prince' and 'King Raven' about.

When midnight on the 24th occurred and Christmas Day officially began, it was to find Harry on the Pit's couch, gazing at the fire. It was deathly quiet in the Pit, as it had tended to be lately, but it bothered him this year. Normally, he would at least have Tonks and Solieyu to talk to. He didn't have anyone around this time. He had idly danced around the idea of transfiguring something into a Christmas tree, but the idea seemed to sour him in the end. Why bother? He wouldn't have anyone to share it with.

Malfoy had made himself scarce after the fight he had had. He was probably mulling over what his decision had meant, too. It had been a brave thing to do, and it was a big step for the blonde. Harry didn't blame him for wanting to be alone. But Harry wanted just the opposite. He needed someone there for him. He needed to be able to know someone cared. He couldn't go see Sirius for the holidays. He couldn't even send his godfather a present. It would be intercepted. All mail coming into and going out of Hogwarts was being inspected these days.

Naturally, Harry was awake all night. His mind went over the same things countless times. He knew the answers to all the questions he had given to himself. But it helped to pass the time. It helped distract him. Anything to avoid feeling so empty on such a festive day. Hogwarts wasn't decorated as much as it usually was this year. Hagrid's giant pumpkins were nowhere to be found, for one. Apparently, he had taken offense to Umbridge's comments about his teaching style and he had become distant. It hadn't helped that Dumbledore was removed from command of the school.

It was a miserable, depressing Christmas, the first one Harry had experienced since learning he was a wizard.

Getting to his feet, Harry headed for the door. He had something he needed to do. As he walked the familiar corridors of the castle, he slid his hands into his pockets. Hogwarts itself almost seemed sick this year. Harry could understand that, given the mess going on inside its walls. At least Hogwarts seemed to be on his side.

Harry saw her from down the hallway the minute he rounded the corner. She was walking with a few of her friends. They stopped when they saw him approaching. Pansy's friends backed away from her when they saw the look on his face. As Harry drew closer, he pulled his right hand from his pocket, put it under Pansy's chin, gently tilted her head up, and moved his in.

This time it could be Pansy's turn to be shocked by a kiss out of nowhere.

When Harry stepped back, hand sliding back into his pocket, he gauged the girl's reaction. She was blushing quite deeply, of course.

Her friends had a mix of confusion, horrified, and jealous expressions on their faces. Pansy herself just looked stunned, as though she would never have expected Harry to do something like that. To be fair, Harry himself didn't think he had it in him. But she was willing to be there for him - willing to help him - when Tonks wouldn't. She knew how he felt, she knew exactly what was going on, and she was still willing to do that. It meant more to Harry than he could adequately express in words.

"We need to talk." Harry finally said, his voice quiet.

Pansy simply nodded slowly, following behind Harry as he turned and walked off. The minute they had vanished from view, her friends immediately launched into a conversation that would consume the better part of their day.

"That... wow..." Pansy said as she caught up to Harry. "I... didn't expect that kind of answer..."

"Sometimes..." Harry began, offering the girl a wan smile, "The best choice is the obvious one."

"So... wait, does this...?" Pansy began.

"It does." Harry said.

"I know it won't be forever..." Pansy said. "But... at least for now..."

"Yeah." Harry murmured. "For now..."

Back in the Pit a few minutes later, Harry sank back onto the couch. Pansy sat next to him, still looking incredulous at the whole situation. After awhile, though, it finally sank in. When it did, she scooted closer and leaned against Harry.

Harry blinked at this. "...You really have cared for a long time, haven't you? Why?"

"Second year." Pansy murmured quietly. "You changed my way of thinking. About breaking free of the path I was on and finding a new one to walk down. Without even having to pause to think about it, and

with me pinning you to the wall, wand aimed, you said you'd risk your life even to save someone like me."

"I remember that." Harry said, slipping an arm around Pansy's shoulders as he continued to gaze at the fire. "I'm sorry for all the mean things I said to you that day. You gave me my first kiss ever. You know that, right?"

"...What, seriously?" Pansy asked, turning her head to look at Harry.

"Yup. Foreshadowing, I guess." Harry chuckled.

Pansy smiled at him. "Seems like it. Things didn't quite work out the way I'd hoped. I was kind of hoping you would notice me at the Yule Ball last year..."

"And then I went and kissed Tonks in front of everyone. Guess that explains that. Sorry..." Harry said.

"It's partly my own fault. I got all dressed up and didn't even have the nerve to approach you. Figured you wouldn't notice me even if I did..." Pansy muttered.

"Times change." Harry said. "You did look very pretty, for the record. It did make me a minute before I realized it was you, though."

"Yeah, I tried something different. I liked it. Not a great night on the whole, though." Pansy admitted. "...Harry?"

"Yes?"

"Does this mean... y'know... tonight?" Pansy asked.

"I... not tonight, no. I'm sorry, Pansy." Harry sighed. "We're going to have to start small... You have to realize what a big jump this is..."

"No, I understand. It's alright. Now that I know... I don't mind waiting." Pansy said, laying her head over on Harry's shoulder.

Leaning his against hers, Harry closed his eyes. "Merry Christmas, Pansy. Sorry I wasn't able to get you a proper present."

"You gave me better than I was expecting." Pansy said, unable to keep a grin from rising. "Could've been worse."

"Yeah. I could have gift-wrapped Goyle for you." Harry said.

"Ohhh, Harry! Please don't make me think about that! Oh, I don't want breakfast now..." Pansy scowled.

Laughing for what seemed to be the first time in ages, Harry apologized. "Sorry, sorry. Cheap shot. Couldn't resist."

Pansy tilted her head to kiss Harry's cheek. "It's good to hear you laugh."

"It's good to have the ability to laugh back." Harry said.

"Merry Christmas." Pansy said. "I hope I'm a good enough present."

"You are." Harry said, kissing the girl's forehead softly. "You are."

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry had spent the better part of the winter holidays steeling himself. When they came to an end, he knew that all hell would end up breaking loose if he wasn't careful. Harry had talked to Malfoy many times about what he planned to do. Malfoy had shrugged the concern off, saying he would be able to handle the riffraff by himself. Harry accepted this, but said that if anything should happen, he had better escape to the Pit. Better to preserve one's life than one's pride.

Harry had spent most of the holidays in the Pit with Pansy, slowly getting used to her being so close to him. Things had yet to progress up to where Harry would feel comfortable with her sleeping with him, but he was feeling better than he had in months. It wasn't saying a whole lot, then, that he still looked like hell and couldn't sleep properly. But his days, at least, were less painful now. It was a step in the right direction and one that he was happy with having made.

Still, things weren't going to be pleasant once everyone returned. Many things would come crashing back down. His issues with his friends and the Slytherins harassing Pansy and Malfoy being

paramount. Harry was sure Lucius was planning something to get even with his traitorous son. Most likely tapping fellow Death Eater children to do his dirty work for him. That or he'd have Umbridge spirit his son off. If Harry had his way, Malfoy would just stay cooped up in the Pit until Umbridge was booted from the headmistress position. But, as he had no idea when that would be, not to mention the fact that Malfoy would laugh if he even suggested it, it wasn't to be.

The day the holiday break ended, Harry was in the Great Hall. He and Pansy had spent most of the morning talking. She and Malfoy assured him time and again that they would be fine - that not all Slytherins were destined to be Death Eaters. Malfoy had been very well regarded in their House and should still be able to pull respect from those without the Mark. It wasn't a lot of hope to go on, but it was enough to keep Harry from worrying about it as much.

There was no use trying to hide it anymore. The Death Eaters' children now knew for certain what side Malfoy had chosen. Trying to hide it now would be pointless. And with Harry in such an unstable mood, he was sure that if Malfoy couldn't make the Slytherins cower away from him, HE could. He was banking on it, anyway. And with the fallout sure to occur when his friends saw that he and Pansy had more or less become an item over the holidays, he was sure to be in a bad enough mood to pull it off.

They began arriving in mid-morning and, by lunchtime, everyone was in the Great Hall. At the staff table, Umbridge gave a simpering welcome back speech to those who had gone home. Harry once more sat at the end of the Ravenclaw table. He got up to greet the Weasleys when they came back, asking how their father was.

"Good as ever!" Fred declared.

"*You* don't seem to look as bad anymore, either." George observed.

"What happened?" They asked in unison.

"You'll see." Harry said, his smile fading slightly. "In fact, I'm sure everyone will. Might need help fending off Tonks and Leon."

"Oh dear." Ginny said. "This isn't going to be good, is it?"

"Not in the least." Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck. "But it had to happen. And, as you've noted, I look better now. It isn't a coincidence. Oh, and if any of you happen to overhear someone talking about Draco, shake them down and ask what for. It's going to be dangerous for awhile."

"Roger that." The twins said, glancing at the Slytherin table. Draco and Pansy were sitting at the end closest to the door, like Harry was. A few of their real friends were acting as a buffer between them and the Death Eaters' children. There were openly hostile looks being shot their way.

Harry went back to the Ravenclaw table and sat as the Weasleys headed for their own. Harry had made no real plans for how things were going to go. He would fly by the seat of his pants like usual and just pray for the best outcome. He knew it wouldn't occur, but it never hurt to try. If neither Solieyu or Tonks got in contact with him by the end of lunch, things with Pansy would continue as planned. And judging by the fact that neither had even said hello to him when they showed up...

Harry blew out a sigh and poked at his plate of food. He wasn't hungry, to be honest. His stomach had been in knots all day. Still. He had told them what he was going to do if they didn't grow up. It wasn't his fault if neither wanted to comply. It was their own fault if they got upset at the sudden change that had taken place. He had done everything he could.

When lunch drew to a close, Harry was the first to get up to leave. Pansy took note and hopped over to him, catching up before he left the room.

"You okay?" She asked quietly.

"About as well as to be expected." Harry said, glancing over his shoulder. Solieyu and Tonks both seemed to be watching him out of the corners of their eyes. "...Hey, Pansy?"

"Yeah?"

"Wanna throw rocks at the hornet's nest?"

"What?"

"Kiss me." Harry stated, looking the girl in the eyes.

Pansy gaped at him. "Here?! In front of everyone?!"

"Best way to get the point across, isn't it?" Harry asked, grinning.

"Well yeah, but..." Pansy shook her head. "You're certifiable, Potter. You know that?"

"I'm getting better." Harry said, still smiling. "I have a good shrink."

Pansy snorted. "It's a good thing you're cute, Harry. You'd never make it as a comic. Oh, very well. But you have to protect me if something happens." Pansy said.

"As you wish, milady." Harry murmured.

The reaction wasn't exactly what Harry had figured it would be. The first thing that happened was gasping and shock from general areas of the room. Then hurried whispering broke out. By the time the kiss had ended, Tonks was on her feet at storming over. Solieyu was still seated, though it looked like he wanted to get up, too. The Gryffindors were just *staring*. Luna had her head tilted and had an interesting look in her eyes that Harry couldn't quite make out. Malfoy just looked exasperated.

"What was that?" Demanded Tonks as she got closer. "What the **hell** was that?!"

"Me doing what I said I was going to." Harry stated, crossing his arms. "Would you have me wait forever?"

"There's nothing to wait for." Tonks declared.

"Clearly." Harry agreed. "So why the fuss?"

"That isn't what I meant."

"Well aware of that."

Tonks glared, her gaze turning to Pansy, who glared back. "What did you do to him?"

"I made him feel better." Pansy said.

"Don't bother." Harry said, glancing aside at the Slytherin. "She probably didn't even notice that I looked better."

"I did too." Tonks said, lifting her head higher.

"Thanks for saying hi when you came back, by the way." Harry said. "My holidays were fine, thank you."

"So it would seem." Tonks said. "So, is this really what you want?"

"All things considered? I have little alternative." Harry said.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Asked Tonks.

"What do you think?" Harry asked, glaring at his former girlfriend. "She's been there for me when you were wistfully chasing after Leon! I've finally gotten some *rest!*"

"You're *sleeping* together?!" Tonks screeched.

"Not yet." Pansy muttered.

"Just napping on the couch right now. I seem to be hung up on the past - can't imagine why - so I'm taking it slow." Harry said. "For now. But given your actions, it seems I don't have any reason to keep holding myself back. You clearly don't care about me anymore, so why bother acting like you do? Who are you trying to kid here, *NYMMY?*"

Harry's head jerked to the right as Tonks slapped him. Clenching his teeth to bite back a string of insults that was building, he slowly looked back at Tonks, whose eyes had gotten watery. There was also the very distinct fact that she had her wand aimed at his chest. Pansy had drawn hers almost as quickly as Tonks had and was aiming at the same place on the Ravenclaw girl.

"It's alright, Pansy." Harry said, bringing a hand up to gently push Pansy's arm down. He then looked down at the wand that was inches from his chest. "What do you think you're doing?" He asked, glancing up at the girl. "You've already destroyed what was in there."

Tonks stared up at Harry for a few seconds before shoving him to one side and running from the Great Hall. Solieyu got to his feet and crossed the Great Hall in a few very long strides. He paused only briefly when he passed by Harry, his face twisted in rage.

"You have no idea how much she's hurting." Solieyu growled.

"Yeah. I do." Harry replied. "Almost as much as I am. I'd hoped you two would get better over the holidays. I can't be expected to wait forever, Leon. I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as you will be if you ever do that to her again." Solieyu spat, quickly leaving the Great Hall to chase after Tonks.

Harry blew out a sigh as he watched the vampire leave. "That went about as well as expected. Think I'm gonna go lay down for awhile."

"Want me to come along?" Pansy asked tentatively.

"I'd rather you keep with Draco for awhile." Harry said. "You can watch each other's back. Drop by tonight for dinner? I'll probably be in dire need of some rest. Maybe I'll have cleared my head out by then, too."

"Sure." Pansy nodded. She leaned up to kiss Harry on the cheek before heading back to the Slytherin table. Harry smiled faintly before turning to head out of the room.

He was only halfway to the Pit before the twins and Ginny caught up to him.

"You sure do know how to create a stir." Ginny commented, eyebrows raised.

"Figured I'd get it out of the way as soon as I could." Harry said, hands in his pockets.

"So you and Parkinson are together now? When'd this happen?"
Asked George.

"Christmas Day." Harry said. "I told her I'd make up my mind by then. Leon and Tonks didn't even say goodbye when they left. I was depressed. Spent most of the day curled up on the couch together."

"What about Leon and Tonks?" Fred asked. "If they come to their senses, I mean."

Harry sighed. "Pansy knows what would happen. She's fine with it. At least, that's what she tells me. I know she isn't. She really does love me. But she's willing to be there for me. She's willing to listen to me when I need to get things off my chest. I don't have nightmares around her. Like I said, we're not staying in the bedroom or anything, but... I need to soon. Napping is just making me realize how much sleep I really do need. I can't wait much longer."

Putting a hand on his back, Ginny asked, "Have you talked to Luna any?"

"She didn't write." Harry said. "Have any of you?"

"She came to visit." Ginny said. "She's still your friend, by the way. She and Hermione both. We all spent some quality girl time together gossiping over the holidays."

"Nearly drove us crazy." Said the twins.

Harry chuckled. "Reached a verdict, huh?"

"Yup. Malfoy and Pansy are fine in our books. He's proven as much by now. And Pansy... well, like you said. She clearly loves you." Ginny said.

"So how's Luna doing? Hermione can distance herself from this mess and look at it logically. Luna's involved directly." Harry said, sighing.

"She's a really strong person, Harry. She realizes what's going on and is willing to wait. Actually, in her own words, she said, 'I'm willing

to wait for my idiot boyfriend to stop acting like there's a Red-Speckled Wharfrat on his back."

"She's fine, then." Harry said, smiling crookedly. "Probably a bit depressed, but she understands. That's good. Leon needs someone strong."

"So what's your plan now?" Fred asked.

"Regarding?"

"This whole situation. Umbridge. The Slytherins. Leon and Tonks." George continued, waving a hand in a vague gesture.

"Umbridge I'm still thinking about. I'm hoping the Slytherins, divided as they are now, won't end up tearing each other apart. Snape's going to be hanging around the common room for awhile, I think. Or at least checking in on it regularly. Draco and Pansy are both strong, so I don't have to worry too much. Still... Umbridge is a Death Eater. Snape told me himself, after all. I'm just worried she'll try and spirit Draco off or something."

"Yeah, that would be a problem. Guess we're gonna have to keep a close eye on him, huh?" Ginny said.

"Pretty much. As for Leon and Tonks, I've already made my decision. If they want to be a part of my life again, it's up to them." Harry said.

"Pretty harsh. Justified, though." Ginny said.

"Anyway, I'm gonna try and take a nap. Try and keep the school from exploding while I'm off having nightmares?" Harry said, leaning against the spot near the invisible wall that lead to the Pit's stairs.

"Sure. Good luck with your nap." Ginny said, grinning.

"Yeah, boatloads of fun." Harry said, rolling his eyes. "Oh, and tell Hermione and Luna I said thanks for not deserting me. Told Pansy she and Draco should come down for dinner tonight. Wanna gather everyone and stop in?"

"Sounds like fun." Fred said. "Better than listening to the gossip mill run their mouths!" Fred said.

"Our dear sister did enough of that for a whole year." George added.

"Oh, I did, huh?" Ginny said, rounding on the twins, who back-stepped.

"Well, we'll be off then!" Fred said quickly.

"See you tonight!" George added.

The two turned and ran up the hall, with Ginny giving chase. Harry just smiled as he stepped through the wall and headed down the stairs. After greeting Levi and giving the password, he stepped into the Pit and trudged over to the couch. Flopping back on it, he stared up at the ceiling.

"How did it go?" Boris asked from his position atop the fireplace.

"Could've been worse." Harry murmured, eyes shutting. "Everyone save Leon and Tonks should be coming by for dinner. So that's nice."

"Providing the Slytherins don't try anything." Boris said.

"Yeah, providing the Slytherins don't try anything." Harry said, nodding.

"Going to try sleeping?"

"That's the plan." Harry yawned.

"Good luck."

"Thanks. I think I'm going to need it." Harry mumbled.

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It had been the first time Malfoy had actively joined in on dinner at the Pit. It had proved to be an interesting experience. Everyone but Solieyu and Tonks had arrived, which was just fine with Harry, who

had slept barely an hour before waking to the nightmares and visions. He was hoping for a full turn-out.

Most of the conversation revolved around everyone's holidays and what they had gotten as presents. Harry made sure to steer the conversation away from himself, Pansy, and Malfoy. Thankfully, everyone picked up on this quickly and stuck to their own stories. It was a pleasant dinner, though Malfoy had been a bit quiet. His mind was probably still whirling in regards to what he had done. Pansy was more talkative, however, and had spent a good ten minutes actively talking with Luna about creatures that Harry knew didn't actually exist.

Once the meal was over, people slowly began to file out. Hermione gave Harry a hug and said that she was glad he was feeling better before she took off. Luna just smiled at he and Pansy before excusing herself. The three Weasleys more or less left in a group. Ginny ended up chasing them again.

Harry stretched, leaning back in his chair and glancing at the two remaining Slytherins. "So, how did your days go? Anything happen yet?"

"Not as such." Malfoy said. "But you can see it in their eyes. I may be spending more time down here than I had envisioned."

"Perfectly fine. Umbridge doesn't know about this place. No one but us, Dumbledore, and a few members of staff do. And the staff hate Umbridge as much as we do." Harry said. "You and Pansy both are welcome to stay as long as you want. Got everything you need, really. Could always do something else with the training room - turn it into a second bedroom or something."

"I trust everyone in my dorm." Malfoy said.

"Crabbe and Goyle too?" Harry asked.

"They're idiots. They just go along with what the majority does. Besides, even if they do try anything, they're completely awful with hexes and the like. The day I can't drop both of them in five seconds flat, even from a deep sleep, is the day I stop being a Slytherin." Malfoy said.

"Plus Blaise is there to help watch his back." Pansy said. "He wasn't Marked. And you saw my friends, Harry. They all lingered behind, too. But their parents weren't Death Eaters, so..."

"Yeah. Well, alright. The invitation stands, though." Harry said. "You two should get back soon, then. Umbridge's stupid curfew and all."

Everyone got up and walked to the Pit's door in the main room. Pansy gave Harry a tight hug. "You sure you don't want me to stay?" She asked.

"Not entirely. Another day or two, Pansy. I promise, I won't take much longer. I need sleep in the worst way." Harry said, smiling apologetically.

Pansy nodded. "Alright. Well, try to keep yourself entertained overnight, then."

"I'll try. Draco, good luck with your former bodyguards." Harry said, smirking.

"Yes, yes. You know, we should duel again someday, Potter. It's been awhile. I want to see how strong you are these days. Gauge my own power." Malfoy said, smirking back.

"Sure. It'd be a good way to get rid of some of this built-up frustration." Harry said.

"Boys." Pansy said, turning and opening the door. "C'mon, Draco. Let's get going."

"What are you, my mother?" Malfoy scowled, turning and following Pansy. "See you tomorrow, Potter. Try not to go insane overnight."

"I'll do my best." Harry said, glaring at Malfoy. It was their usual 'good night' words to one another since Malfoy had jumped ship to the right side, but it was still annoying.

When they had left, Harry walked to the fireplace to collect Boris before heading into the bedroom. "Another day down." He said.

"You lot sounded energetic in there. Have a good time?" Asked the taipan.

"I did." Harry said, setting Boris down on the nightstand and going to change clothes. "It was the first bit of real fun I've had in awhile."

"Are you going to let Pansy start staying in here with you?" Boris asked.

"I think so. After what happened today, it's clear that this problem isn't going to solve itself any time soon. No sense in waiting much longer. I'll give them a few more days to come to their senses." Harry said, walking back to the bed and flopping forward onto it. He groaned quietly and remained motionless for awhile before crawling up and laying down properly. "I need real sleep again."

"Yes, you do." Boris said. *"Occlumency still not working right?"*

"Nope." Harry said. "Hopefully soon, though."

"Hopefully."

Taking off his glasses and setting them next to Boris, Harry closed his eyes and yawned out a 'good night' to the snake. Getting to sleep wasn't difficult anymore. It was remaining asleep that was the problem. Not that he wanted to remain asleep through all the chaos he saw on a daily basis. Still, he had resumed a somewhat normal schedule, sleeping in his bed every night rather than staying awake and staring into the fireplace all night.

He drifted off quickly, and for a time, he was able to dream normally. The ability had been returning bit by bit the longer he slept in Pansy's presence. But, just as with anything, he had good days and bad days. Sometimes, he'd barely be out five minutes before the nightmares would hit him. The longest he'd been able to sleep on his own was just shy of two hours. It wasn't much, but it was better than it had been.

Harry and Pansy had been sitting out by Hogwarts' lake in his dream, neither speaking, both watching as the giant squid played around with the merpeople. When he heard the familiar sizzling sound that

indicated his good dreams would be going away, he was quick to kiss Pansy. He knew it wasn't the real thing, of course, but it still made him feel good. He was going to need all the happy feelings he could muster.

But something wasn't right. Things were fading away much faster than they usually did. Whatever was going on, it was stronger than Harry was used to. He quickly got to his feet as the dream Pansy vanished next to him. The dark void only lasted for a matter of seconds before a dark room came into vision. He had seen this room before. It was a room filled with strange little clear orbs. Balthazar had been involved in that dream, if his memory was serving him. Had the conduit gem been in this place at one point? Or was it merely a coincidence?

Harry had barely taken in his surroundings when a weak-sounding voice called out for help. He tried to move, as he recognized the voice, but found himself immobile. Just then, a chill went down his spine. His eyes slid to the right, where a familiar figure was standing, looking amused.

"Hello, Harry." Purred Voldemort, walking over. "How nice of you to join me once again. Oh yes, I'm quite aware of the fact that you've been seeing my plans. I've been actively trying to send them to you for awhile now. Have you enjoyed my work, Harry? Ah, don't struggle like that - I assure you, you can't speak. I am in full control right now."

Voldemort aimed his wand at Harry, who felt himself lifting off of the ground. The Dark Lord spun Harry to the left. "You may be wondering why I've chosen tonight to speak to you. Well, it's very simple. Look very carefully at the corner of the room. Do you see someone?"

Harry could feel his heartbeat increase. In the darkness of the room, a curled-up figure could barely be made out. The man, for it was too large to be a woman, seemed to be shaking. There was blood splattered around him.

"You know him, do you not? Yes, I believe so. Foolish Dumbledore, always sending his minions out to do his dirty work. Never doing it himself. So unlike me. I take pride in all I do, Harry. But I'm sure you've already seen enough of it to know that. But to think that I've

been able to do this... it's been a very fun night for me, Harry. Would you like a better look at him?" Voldemort asked, whispering the final words mere inches from Harry's right ear.

Unable to respond or do anything to fight it, Harry was floated across the room by Voldemort. Once they had gotten closer to the corner, Voldemort lowered Harry to the ground before turning his wand on the man hunched in the corner, who let out a pleading gasp not to hurt him anymore. Voldemort assured the man that, for the time being at least, the pain would not continue. Instead, the Dark Lord illuminated the corner.

Moments later, Harry found himself jerking awake, coughing up blood for the second time that school year.

"Harry! What's wrong?!" Boris asked, lifting his head.

"He's dying." Harry coughed, wiping at his mouth with his hand.

"Another vision? Who is it this time, Harry? Who's been attacked?" Boris asked.

"Sirius." Harry groaned, getting out of bed as quickly as his tired, aching body would allow. "Voldemort has Sirius at the Ministry of Magic. He's killing him!"

Chapter 17 – Anima

Harry stalked through the corridors of the school as quickly as he could. It was late enough that only the Prefects were out. The only trouble with that was that Umbridge was starting some little group she dubbed her Inquisitorial Squad and some of the Prefects had been tapped to join. Apparently, the power promised to these students was more than simple Prefects could usually have. Power corrupts, Harry bitterly thought.

He had to be careful as he moved. He had cast his usual array of silencing charms on himself so he could be quiet while remaining speedy. Despite this, he had gone out without his invisibility cloak on, and could be easily spotted by anyone within range. It was a risk he had to take. He couldn't be bothered trying to deal with the cloak right now. And anyway, he was getting a bit too tall to fit under it anymore.

Harry was taking a big risk in his plan. He was heading to Dumbledore's office which, despite Umbridge being in control of the school, wouldn't let her in now. The gargoyle out front had refused to step aside and do the frog-woman's bidding. Hogwarts didn't like intruders, he had figured. Just one more reason why he loved the school so much despite all that had taken place within its walls.

The traveling had gone mostly fine, though Harry had suffered a close call at one point. A few Prefects on patrol had rounded a corner and started down the hall Harry was trying to go up. Fate had thrown him a bone then, as there were enough grooves in the wall that he had been able to press himself into one to avoid detection. Still, every second counted and he hated being hung up on things like this.

He was hurting already. With as panicked as he was, it was hard to force his pain receptors to stay shut down. But there was nothing to do about it - he had needed to wake up from that vision. Now all he needed was a way to get to the Ministry to save Sirius. All he needed was to be able to contact someone! He had to get ahold of Grimmauld. He knew that Dumbledore's fireplace was connected. Or he hoped it was, anyway. Harry was praying it was. If it wasn't, he was in trouble. However, even with his mind not functioning properly

due to what had happened, he had concocted a back-up plan in case the fireplaces *weren't* connected. He just hoped it could work.

Reaching the entrance to Dumbledore's office, Harry faced the immovable object guarding it.

"Hi." Harry said. "Look... I'm really glad that you've been keeping that toad out, but I need in. It's an emergency. My godfather's in trouble. Voldemort is hurting him. I don't know if Dumbledore somehow gave you orders or if you're just another part of Hogwarts itself, but *PLEASE* - I need in! I have to see if the fireplaces are connected! You've got to move!"

Nothing happened. Harry's heartbeat increased.

"Come on! I'm not tricking you! Umbridge isn't anywhere nearby! I wouldn't *let* her take command of Dumbledore's office! You *have* to let me in!" Harry said, his voice raising slightly.

The gargoyle statue merely stared forward, not budging an inch.

"DAMN IT! Don't make me blow you apart to get inside!" Harry yelled, not caring if he was heard. "I have to see! I need to know!"

When the statue still remained motionless, Harry glared at it.

"Fine. Be that way. I can get around you! I still have a way! **DOBBY!**"

There was a *CRACK* beside Harry, signalling the arrival of the house elf. Harry grinned down at Dobby, who smiled up at Harry and said, "Harry Potter is calling for Dobby?"

"Yeah!" Harry said, nodding quickly. "Dobby, I think Sirius is in trouble. My godfather. I think Voldemort has him. This stupid statue won't move so I can check the fireplace in Dumbledore's office to see if it's connected to the one at Grimmauld Place. Can you get me inside?"

"Dobby can do you one better." Stated the house elf, holding out his hand. "Hold onto Dobby's hand tightly, Harry Potter, and we is on our way."

Harry blinked, but quickly took Dobby's hand as instructed. The house elf got a mad twinkle in his eyes for a second. Before Harry could ask what Dobby meant, the world around them seemed to fracture and fall apart. The darkness around them was filled with bright, blue objects that began hurtling past them at an incredible speed. But whether the objects were moving or whether it was Harry and Dobby, the Ravenclaw didn't know.

And then, they were halted again. Or the objects had stopped moving. Whichever it was, the world around them began putting itself back together like the pieces of a puzzle. Harry looked around, gaping when he saw where they were.

"What... did you just teleport us *to* Grimmauld Place?!" Harry asked.

Sure enough, they were standing in the kitchen of Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place. It was empty at the moment, though a pot of coffee looked to have been brewed recently. Harry walked around a bit and touched a few things so he could be sure this was real.

"Dobby is knowing where Dumbledore's headquarters is, of course, sir." Dobby said, looking proud. "Dobby is being able to pop in and out whenever he is needing to!"

"Oh, Dobby, you're absolutely brilliant!" Harry said, grinning wildly down at the house elf, who beamed and tugged his ears down over his eyes. "Okay, now... needta find somebody..."

Harry had just turned around to leave the room when someone came in. Arthur Weasley's eyebrows raised when he saw Harry and Dobby in the room.

"Harry? What are you doing here?" He asked.

"Mr. Weasley! Oh, am I glad to see you!" Harry said, rushing over. "Please tell me Sirius is here. *Please* tell me he isn't out of the house!"

Arthur's brow creased. "Harry, Sirius and Remus have both been out on a mission for Albus for awhile now. A few days. Why? Did something happen?"

"I... did your kids tell you how you were saved?" Harry asked.

"They told me you had some kind of vision and went to Minerva. She called on some friends to check on me. ...Did you have another vision?" Arthur asked.

"I did." Harry said. "I... Sirius is at the Ministry of Magic, Mr. Weasley. Voldemort has him! He was being tortured or something. I don't know where he is. There were a bunch of orbs or something. I dunno. I woke myself up and Dobby brought me here. We have to do something!"

"Harry, calm down!" Arthur said, putting his hands on Harry's shoulders and looking him in the eyes. "...Good lord, son, when was the last night you had a proper night's rest?"

"Too long." Harry said. "We have to go get him. Do you know where that room is?"

"Sounds like a place in the Department of Mysteries." Arthur said, turning his head in thought. "Yes, I'm sure of it. Something about prophecies being stored there. People down there are a bit odd, though. I try not to go there if it can be helped."

"We have to, though! But... how do we even *get* to the Ministry?" Harry asked, stepping away and running both hands through his hair. "And we need more people. We need... I dunno, we need some Aurors or some Order members or *SOMETHING*!"

"Harry, calm down, alright? Are you *sure* this was the same kind of thing that happened as when you saw that snake attacking me?" Arthur asked.

"Voldemort appeared. Talked to me. He wouldn't tell me where he was. But Sirius was looking awful." Harry said. "I'm positive it was the same type of vision, Mr. Weasley."

Arthur looked into Harry's eyes for awhile before nodding and turning. "I'll round up some of the lads, then. We can apparate out to the front of the Ministry and make our way from there. Get ready, Harry."

"Thank you." Harry said, a rush of relief coursing through him.

Harry sat down as he waited for Arthur Weasley to return. Dobby lingered around, keeping an eye on Harry, who drummed his fingers faster and faster the longer he had to wait. Dobby didn't much like the look in the boy's eyes. It didn't look like Harry was thinking straight. Not that Dobby would ever dare say something like that out loud. He knew better than that. Even if it was Harry Potter, a wizard who was friendlier to him than anyone else in his life had been. There was something dangerous lurking in those green eyes. Dobby didn't want to be the one to find out what it was.

Some fifteen minutes later, Arthur reappeared, a dozen other people entering behind him. "We're ready. Now just stay here and--"

"No!" Harry cried, getting up to his feet so quickly he knocked his chair over. "I'm going with you!"

"Not in that condition you aren't. You need to rest. Leave it to us, Harry. We can do this." Arthur said, offering the Ravenclaw a reassuring smile.

"He's *my* godfather!" Harry protested. "I have to go!"

"Looks like he's pretty out of it." Commented one of the wizards behind Arthur.

"Someone go wake Poppy up and tell her to give him some Dreamless Sleep. Poor thing looks like he hasn't slept in a month." Piped in a small, plump witch.

"This could be dangerous, Harry." Arthur said, his voice growing louder to silence all the others. "You don't look well. You don't need to come with us. We're fully capable of saving him."

"You owe me." Harry growled. He hated that it came down to this, but there was no way in hell he was being left behind. "If I hadn't forced myself to wake up - like I did tonight. And remind me to tell you the side effects when we get *back* - you would be dead right now. You owe me one, Mr. Weasley!"

Arthur stared at Harry before sighing and bringing a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose. "You're dead set on going, aren't you?"

"If you left me, I'd have Dobby take me there." Harry said. "Right, Dobby?"

Dobby raised his head in defiance when the witches and wizards turned to stare at him. "Right, Harry Potter, sir!"

Arthur sighed again. "Very well. But if any fighting breaks out, you stay back and leave it to us, understand?"

"I've taken down a dragon with only one of these." Harry said, quickly drawing both of his wands. "Can anyone top that?" When no one spoke, Harry smiled and continued, "That's what I thought. Now come on, we need to hurry! We've waited too long as is!"

Some ten minutes (and many instances of Harry demanding everyone hurry up) the small group was standing just inside a frightfully empty Ministry building. Harry had insisted that Dobby come along, as house elf magic might come in handy. Harry had to put up with side-along apparition, which left him dazed as usual, followed by an insipid process of ordering badges into a phone booth.

"Why is no one here?" Was the first thing Harry asked as they entered.

"Good question." Replied one of the witches. "Helga, Brahm, would you two care to help me look around this floor? Arthur and the others can go on ahead."

"Will you be alright by yourselves?" Asked Arthur.

"Unless there's an angry mantichore wandering around." Said the witch, giving the redhead a thumbs-up.

"Right. Okay, you lot, follow me. It's a fairly short lift ride down to the Department of Mysteries. Not exactly sure where to go from there. Very strange down there." Said Arthur, leading the group towards a large elevator.

Once everyone was inside and Arthur had pushed the appropriate button, he turned to Harry. "Any idea what kind of odds we're at? *He* isn't here personally, is he?"

"Could be." Harry said, staring at the elevator doors. "If he is, I'll take care of him. Dobby, if he's here, go and get Dumbledore, okay? I should be able to hold him off until he arrives."

"Right!" Squeaked the anxious little house elf.

"Too dangerous." Said one of the wizards. "I don't care how many times you've gone up against him. The odds are stacked against you at this point."

"True." Harry said. "Never stopped me before, though. I only saw Voldemort himself. But I couldn't exactly move much. He had done something to my dream self so that I couldn't do anything. He moved me around. Talked to me. Didn't say anything of importance."

"Did anyone try contacting Sirius and Remus?" Asked one of the witches.

"Before I gathered everyone. No one answered. And neither of them were supposed to leave the safe house until Dumbledore told them." Arthur said, shaking his head.

"I hope Moony's alright." Harry said. "I only saw Sirius..."

The elevator doors popped open, revealing an oddly-shaped room with at least a dozen hallways branching off from it. As the group stepped out and into it, Harry asked, "Where do we go now?"

"Glass orbs, yeah?" Asked one of the wizards.

"Yeah."

"This way. I've been there before. Had to get something with a barmy old woman." Muttered the wizard, idly twisting at his long beard.

The group followed the bearded man along the long, barren corridor. It began to twist to the right eventually. Halfway up that hall, Harry got

the distinct impression that the passage was actually getting thinner as they went. Rounding the next corner to the left, the hall opened up again, but everyone had to duck slightly due to an annoyingly low ceiling. Harry was getting fed up with the quirky corridor and was about to draw his wands and just blast them a direct path to the room.

But, thankfully, the hallway came to an end not long after that. The room they entered seemed normal enough, though it had many doors lining its walls.

"Now where?" Asked Harry.

"That way." Said the bearded wizard, pointing to the third door on the right. "Should be, anyway. This place has a bad habit of rearranging itself every so often."

"Fantastic." Harry muttered.

"Wands out." Arthur said as the group approached the door. "Better safe than sorry. Can anyone feel or sense anything out of the ordinary?"

"Something..." Dobby said, his voice quiet. "Something is here, sirs. But not from that room..." The house elf turned and paced in front of the doors for awhile. Finally, he stood in front of the fifth door from the left. "In here! There is something strange in here!"

"Colt, Waitright, you two inspect the room with the orbs. If we see anything, you'll be the first to know." Said Arthur.

Two wizards stayed near the door to the orb room while the others walked to where Dobby was standing. Harry looked down at Dobby, then over to Arthur. "Ready?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that?" He asked, smiling faintly. Reaching out, the man grabbed the doorknob and shoved the door open.

All wands were drawn and aimed inside. But there was nothing there. At least, nothing human. Slowly, the group made their way inside. There were various objects scattered about the room, as though it

was little more than a magical storage closet. Harry looked around as the group scattered to investigate the room. There was a car to his left. At least, it looked like it used to be one. It was in pieces now, the silver-colored parts huddled up together behind a roped-off warning labeled 'time machine - keep away.'

"Dobby, sense anything?" Harry asked.

"It's that..." Said the house elf, pointing at an odd-looking doorway-shaped object at the center of the room.

"Anyone know what that is?" Harry asked. Apparently, no one did. Harry thought for a brief moment that he could hear voices coming from it, but he shook his head and listened again. Nothing. He continued scanning the room, searching for potential hiding places or, with any luck, his godfather.

More random relics were passed by. A pair of strange statues, pointed at one another, were standing in one corner of the room. These were behind a wall of glass that stretched from floor to ceiling, blocking them in. There was a sign on it that read 'Quantum Locked - Do Not Move.' Harry wasn't sure what that meant, but decided it couldn't be good. He turned away from the statues, feeling somewhat uncomfortable looking at them.

"There's nothing in here." Harry said after a bit more searching. "Nothing we're here to find, anyway."

"Let's go see if Colt and Waitright have found anything." Arthur said.

"No need to do that." Came a woman's voice from the doorway. She had a thick accent and looked to have stepped out of some old horror movie. She was gaunt in a way that would have made Solieyu look healthy, and had a wild-eyed look about her. She was also grinning. There wasn't a single thing about this woman that screamed 'friendly' to Harry. A sudden *CRACK* occurred from behind him, but he didn't turn to look.

"Who are you?" Asked the bearded wizard, his wand aimed on the woman.

The woman looked at the bearded man for a moment before laughing and aiming her wand behind her. She stepped into the room and gave a sudden jerk on her wand. The crumpled, bloody bodies of Colt and Waitright flew into the room, landing in a heap. Then, slowly, more people began to filter into the room. Death Eaters, in full regalia, joined the woman.

"My name is Bellatrix Lestrange." Said the woman, grinning again. She scanned the room quickly, her eyes landing on Harry. "Ah, there you are. Poor little Potter... my master said you were so strong..."

"Where's Sirius?" Harry growled, his wands in his hands.

"Sirius?" Repeated Bellatrix. "Silly boy, he isn't here."

"What? ...No, he *has* to be here!" Harry said. "I had--"

"A vision? No, you were merely toyed with. He told us he was able to fully manipulate you. What makes you think he didn't manipulate the world around you, as well?" Asked Bellatrix.

Harry felt as though someone had slugged him in the stomach. His eyes slowly moved to the two dead wizards. It was his fault. More would die. The three upstairs probably had been killed as well. If he had just stopped long enough to *THINK*! If he hadn't blindly ran off like some kind of idiot Gryffindor! He was supposed to be a Ravenclaw and yet he was acting like he didn't have a brain at all!

Harry staggered as Bellatrix began to laugh again. "How does it feel, little boy, to know that you've gotten all of these people killed? That you've led them to their deaths?"

"Why... why here? Why did he want to lure me *here*?!" Harry yelled.

"Why indeed." Said Bellatrix, her laughter abruptly halting. "We have need for you, Potter. My master was interested in a prophecy kept in this place. But only the one the prophecy was made for can lift it from its spot amongst all the others. Perhaps if you do as we say, you can spare the lives of these people..."

"We can handle them, Harry." Arthur said, wand clutched tightly in one hand. "Don't do it."

"It all lies for you to decide." Said Bellatrix in a purr. "Do as we say and they may live. Resist and you will all die. Which do you choo--"

She was cut off mid-sentence as a slashing hex flew by, just inches from her head. Her face immediately twisted into rage and she screeched, "**KILL THEM! ALL OF THEM!**"

Bellatrix charged at Harry, who brought up twin shields to guard himself with. A good thing, given how heavily the woman was striking at them. Harry didn't need this! He was hurting badly from dropping his Occlumency enough so he could just muster the power to protect himself. His mind was reeling at being tricked so simply. If he had stopped to think for just a minute, he could have put it together. If he hadn't been caught off-guard. If he had been able to sleep and think rationally...!

Harry was being backed into a corner with each wild motion of Bellatrix's arms. Hit after hit of powerful curses and hexes were pounding against the two shields like battering rams. It was all Harry could do to keep his guard up. He didn't have a chance to go on the offense.

He didn't even dare risking a glance away to see how everyone else was doing. When Bellatrix had charged, so had the others. But Harry had to concentrate on his own attacker. Arthur had insisted that they could hold their own. Harry was banking on it now.

"What's wrong?!" Cried Bellatrix, her horrible grin returning. "I thought you were strong, Potter! I thought you were defiant! I thought you were capable of overcoming *any* odds! Where is all that bravado now?!"

Harry glared at the woman and forced more power into his shields. In truth, he didn't have a comeback to spit in her face. His strength was in his friends, who weren't here with him. Instead, he had lead one of their parents, a man he had only recently saved, into a death trap. His confidence was declining with each passing minute, with each strike against his shields. He was hurting, his vision was getting blurry, and he didn't know how much longer he could keep his shields going. But

he had to try. She had to have a weak point. She had to slip eventually!

But she didn't. Harry was up against a wall now, both literally and figuratively. And still the attacks came, all the while the sounds of battle echoed around the room. And once more, Harry thought he could hear voices coming from the strange doorway in the center of it. Maybe it was some kind of teleportation device. He didn't know where it led, but if he could throw Bellatrix into it, then maybe...

But no, he needed to get an edge just to escape his constant guard, and that didn't look like it was possible.

Just then, a *CRACK* filled the air again. And, from behind him, a squeaky voice cried, "BE STRONG, HARRY POTTER, SIR! THEY IS ALMOST HERE!"

And indeed 'they' were, for moments later spells came flying through the still-open doorway. Some of the Death Eaters, caught offguard, were thrown across the room when they were hit. Moments later and Sirius Black came charging in, taking down a Death Eater that was coming up behind the bearded wizard. Behind him were Remus Lupin and Dumbledore himself.

"**YOU!**" Shrieked Bellatrix, her attention turned on Sirius.

"Shit, what're you doing here?" Sirius asked, growling at the woman.

Before Harry could even lower his shields, the two had launched at one another. Spells and counterspells flew back and forth as the distance between them grew smaller. Lupin ran over to Harry as his shields gave out, catching the Ravenclaw as he wobbled and started to fall forward.

"Are you alright?" Lupin asked.

"They... I'm sorry, Moony... it's all my fault... It's al--
AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

Harry's head snapped back as his scar erupted in pain, blood oozing from it and running down his face. Lupin turned to yell for

Dumbledore to help, but saw that it wasn't going to be possible. Dumbledore was stepping back from the doorway casually, looking as though facing down Lord Voldemort was a daily occurrence. For Voldemort had arrived, along with a second wave of Death Eaters.

"Hello, Tom." Said Dumbledore amicably.

"That is not my name." Hissed Voldemort, stepping into the room far enough that his Death Eaters could flood in around him.

"Tell me, why are you here?" Asked Dumbledore.

"Prophecy!" Harry yelled through his pain. "Some kind of prophecy! He needs me!"

"Ahh..." Dumbledore said, nodding slowly. "Really, Tom, to believe in such things..."

"You know as well as I that it was a true prophecy." Said Voldemort, smiling as he continued into the room. "And I wish to know the part I did not overhear..."

"I am afraid I cannot let that happen." Said Dumbledore. And, before Harry could see what he had done, Dumbledore had closed the distance between himself and Voldemort, firing off a powerful spell at near point-blank range. Voldemort seemed to be expecting an attack, however, and managed to move just in time for the spell to merely clip his left arm. That was all it took. The two were officially engaged in combat.

"Come on!" Lupin said, turning back to Harry and banishing the blood still pouring from his scar. "You need to get out of here!"

"Can't leave!" Harry growled. "I can fight! I can still fight!"

"We can clean this up." Lupin said. "You don't have to do everything yourself, Harry!"

"It's my fault. I'll deal with it!"

"Harry, you--" Lupin began. But a sudden yell from across the room sent both of their heads turning. "Oh god..."

Sirius was pinned against a wall, two large spikes driven through his hands, holding him there. His wand lay on the ground near his feet. Bellatrix was slowly closing it, a crazed expression on her face.

"Really now, Sirius. Do you think you could beat me in a fight?" Purred the woman. "You were in prison longer than I was, if you'll recall."

"And look what it's taken for you to get the advantage, despite that." Sirius said, grinning defiantly at the woman. "What's wrong, Bella? Joints still stiff?!"

Another spike flew forward, piercing Sirius' left leg, just above the knee. Unable to hold it in, he let out another cry of pain. Bellatrix followed up by sending yet another one at Sirius, this one piercing the same place on his other leg.

"Always the rebel, Sirius. Always trying to be different. Things would have been so much easier if you had just given in and joined the rest of us." Bellatrix purred. "But then, you never were much of a fighter."

"Said the woman who had to pin her opponent to the wall to win!" Sirius spat.

"Anything for victory." Said Bellatrix.

"You'll get yours eventually, Bella." Sirius growled. "And if there's any justice in the universe, you'll suffer for a long time before it happens!"

"I cause others to suffer, my dear Sirius. I am too strong to suffer myself." Bellatrix stated, drawing her wand arm back.

Sirius eyed her wand. "Planning to kill me now, are you?"

"Unfortunately, I have more important matters to attend to." Bellatrix said, the psychotic expression returning to her face. "Goodbye, Sirius."

It was as if it all happened in slow motion to Harry, from the time he saw Sirius pinned to the wall to the time Bellatrix's final attack had happened. Sirius' eyes were able to land on Harry just long enough for the Ravenclaw to understand the meaning within them.

'I'm sorry.'

Bellatrix's arm spiraled forward, jabbing Sirius in the center of his chest. There was a deep rumbling from the whole area and, seconds later, Sirius literally ceased to exist. It was as if his entire body had exploded, splattering his blood onto everything surrounding it, Bellatrix included. There were no body parts left to fly, as they had all been vaporized. Only the blood had remained.

Harry stared. Lupin's hands had slid off his shoulders as his friend had been destroyed. He had come to rescue Sirius... and because of that, Sirius had been killed. The thought circled round and round in Harry's tired mind. Around it went, over and over, the power behind it building with each circuit it made. And then... it stopped. Everything stopped.

Harry threw back his head and screamed as his magic erupted throughout the room.

Death Eaters and Order members alike were sent flying. Poor Remus Lupin, standing closest to Harry, was sent smashing back and into one of the many objects littered about the room. Glass shattered as Harry's magic coursed through it. Objects rattled and flattened from the force being exerted.

Harry's body, as though acting on its own, swung loosely so that he faced the blood-soaked Bellatrix Lestrange. When his eyes opened, they were entirely green for the briefest of moments. And, in that time, a bright, white light encased his body. When it passed, Harry's eyes were burning with anger. Tears, unspilled, remained in the corners of them. He was visibly shaking, though his body felt revitalized.

"Good, Potter!" Cried Bellatrix, laughing once more. "Give in to it! To the hatred! To the *anger*! Fight me, Potter! **FIGHT ME!**"

Harry took a step towards the woman, his hands wrapped tightly around his wands. Bellatrix laughed as he wobbled slightly. The laughing was cut short when another brief, white flash encased Harry's body. Suddenly, he was standing directly in front of Bellatrix. The woman barely had time to raise a shield spell. But it wasn't enough. A jerk of Harry's wands and it shattered, the force of which threw her back.

Another scream left Harry's throat as he charged. Dumbledore's head suddenly turned to stare at the boy as a surge of power filled the room. Voldemort seemed to feel it as well, for he was now watching Harry too. As Bellatrix got back to her feet, Harry's arms crossed over his chest. And, as Bellatrix tried in vain to bring up another shield spell, Harry began his attack.

Harry's arms shot back and forth in violent, whip-like motions. And, as though they were actual whips, each lashing made Bellatrix scream louder. Each hit caused her to stumble farther and farther backwards until she was up against the wall. But still, Harry's attack continued, mercilessly crushing the woman's soul with the power of the one spell he had promised never to use.

When the Anima Laniatus ended, Bellatrix sunk to the ground. She was twitching and her eyes were wide and filled with tears. But Harry wasn't finished yet. Jabbing both wands at her, Harry pierced the woman's shoulders with two long, tendril-like magical tethers. Another scream from Harry and Bellatrix was sent flying across the room. He jabbed his wands at her as she connected to the wall near the ceiling. The tethers connected again. Harry threw his arms downward, sending Bellatrix smashing to the floor. And one final time, the tethers were attached to send the woman hurtling back across the room. She landed in a heap near Harry's feet.

Levitating her up, not caring about her pathetic, weak pleas to stop, Harry slammed her into the wall. And, just as she had done with Sirius, Harry held her in place to that spot using two large bolts.

Before anyone could stop him, his arm was drawn back. He shot forward, the spiral and jab at the end packing more force than he had ever put into it before. His wand slamming into her stomach,

Bellatrix's scream was lost as her body was given the same fate as her victim's.

Thoroughly coated with Bellatrix's blood now and panting heavily, Harry turned. Nobody in the room was fighting anymore. Combatants on both sides had stopped to witness Harry's power be unleashed.

And, before Dumbledore could stop him, Voldemort had muttered a spell at each of his surviving Death Eaters. As it hit, they vanished with a loud *CRACK*ing sound. Voldemort himself merely gave Harry a strange grin before he used the spell on himself.

For a long time after that, no one moved. Harry was staring at Dumbledore now, the hate still swirling in his bright, green eyes. And, completely at random, he charged the old man, a flurry of spells leaving his wands as he ran across the room.

Dumbledore, however, was much stronger than Bellatrix Lestrange had been. His shields lasted the onslaught brought on by the furious Ravenclaw. Time and again, Harry's attacks crashed into Dumbledore's shields. But Harry was visibly weakening. He screamed at Dumbledore, yelling that if he had only been at Hogwarts - if he had been there to help - none of this would have happened. That Dumbledore would have been able to get ahold of Sirius using Fawkes. That no one would've had to die.

Harry let out a choked gasp as something struck him in the small of the back. He dropped down to his knees immediately, turning to look over his shoulder. And, as he crumpled to the ground unconscious, the small form of a sad house elf looked back.

Dumbledore stared down at the boy for a long while before aiming his wand. His levitating spell hitting, Dumbledore raised Harry's body into the air.

"I am sorry." Whispered the elderly man. "I am so very sorry. For everything I have caused to happen to you." And then, looking around the room at the witches and wizards who were still alive, he announced, "We are leaving. Collect the dead."

Dumbledore turned and left the room, floating Harry's body behind him. Dobby followed behind the former headmaster, looking up at him and asking, "Is Harry Potter going to be alright, Dumbledore, sir?"

"I do not know, Dobby." Sighed Dumbledore, looking at least twice his age. "We can only pray he will be."

"Harry Potter is a strong wizard!" Dobby asserted. "He will be better!"

"Perhaps. But I am afraid if he recovers, it will leave him changed. We can only hope it is for the better, despite the carnage we have witnessed here tonight..." Dumbledore said, his voice soft. "But there are some things in this world that are impossible to overcome."

"We must believe in him, Dumbledore, sir." Said Dobby, ears lowering. "He is needing us, so we has to believe. We has to be there when he is needing us."

"Yes." Dumbledore said, an edge to his voice suddenly. "And the first step towards being there for him is reclaiming Hogwarts. I am afraid that this has gone on for long enough!"

Chapter 18 – Changes

Harry opened his eyes slowly. It was dark. Blissfully dark.

Turning his head to the left, he could just make out Boris' moving form. Ah. That's where he was. That was nice of them, depositing him in his own bed instead of making him stay in the hospital wing. He closed his eyes again, sighing softly. It had been the best sleep he'd gotten in ages. It did beg the question of how long he had been asleep, though.

"Boris?" Harry asked, coughing as he realized how dry his throat was.

"Yes?" Replied the taipan.

"How long?"

"Two months."

"Shit."

"How do you feel?"

Harry groaned. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to think. He just wanted to sleep. But he moved his limbs a little just to humor his friend. "Not dead."

"Always a plus, I suppose." Said Boris.

"Indeed." Harry said. "What time is it?"

"Past your dinnertime." Boris said. *"There are people waiting for you to awaken. Do you feel up to facing them?"*

"No. I take it the story has been told." Harry said.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Do not worry." Boris said. *"I have had a lot of time to think about it. I will not lie, I was disturbed and upset to find out that you had used the*

Laniatus. But the more I thought, the less those feelings were. You just had the one family member you actually liked killed. I cannot begin to understand human emotions properly, but..."

"It was justified? Yeah. I don't feel bad for killing her. I'm not sorry I did that. I was apologizing for the Laniatus." Harry said, sitting up and reaching for his glasses. He got out of bed a moment later and went to change out of the pajamas someone had stuck him in.

"*I know.*" Boris said.

"What's happened at Hogwarts since I left and became unhinged?"

"Too much. I believe that is a question you need to ask your friends." Boris said.

"Yeah, so... here I go." Harry said, pausing a moment to put up his Occlumency barriers. It came easily and the barriers felt much stronger than Harry remembered them being. Odd, but very comforting. He could remain in control of himself again.

He opened the door to find the Pit filled with almost everyone who knew of it. And everyone was on their feet the moment he emerged. He brought a hand up and instantly the commotion died down. Offering a faint smile, he closed the bedroom door and leaned back against it. Pansy, Malfoy, and Ginny had been sitting on the couch. The twins were mulling about near the back of the room. Hermione and Luna had been in the corners, reading.

Taking a deep breath, Harry paused for a moment before saying simply, "Hi."

Pansy rushed over and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face against her neck. "Oh god, I thought you'd never wake up."

"Careful." Harry said, his voice quiet. "I'm damaged goods."

"Idiot." Pansy murmured.

Looking around, Harry blew out a quick sigh through his nose. "I need catching up. Again. I don't like this part."

"Well." Malfoy began, stretching his arms along the back of the couch. "Umbridge is dead, Dumbledore is back in control of the school, and Fudge is missing and presumed to be dead as well."

Harry blinked. "Okay, I'm going to need you to go over these one at a time."

"Fair enough." Said Malfoy.

"Umbridge is dead." Harry said.

"That's right." Malfoy replied.

"How?"

"Got herself killed." Malfoy said.

"By who?"

"Me."

"What?"

"She attacked me first."

"*What?!?*"

"It was self defense. Had to."

"**WHAT?** ...Okay, I need more explanation than that. Tell me what happened, Draco." Harry said.

Malfoy smirked. "Well, Potter, she knew you'd gotten out of Hogwarts that night. Before you ask, Dumbledore told us what happened. She'd set up some kind of intensely sensitive wards around the school to detect anything coming in or going out by way of means magical or otherwise. Dobby counted as 'otherwise,' apparently."

"She collected all of us." Said Hermione quietly. "Rounded us all into a room. She said she knew it was you. She thought we knew where you went."

"What did she do?" Harry asked.

"Well, she initially tried doing things the nice way. When it became clear we weren't going to spill it, she got nasty." Fred said.

"Started hitting us with spells." George continued. "Well, we're tougher than the basic stuff she was using. Malfoy saw that she was going to ramp up to meaner stuff, so he started to taunt her."

"She didn't like that." Malfoy said. "See, she knew who got Marked at Christmas. She knew I wasn't there. So she wasn't exactly happy with me anyway. I started to taunt her and she outright attacked me. Trouble there is, she was fat and slow. And I'm not."

"Malfoy got loose--" Fred said.

"She had us all tied up, see." George added.

"Yeah. So Malfoy got loose when one of her wild cutting hexes hit his ropes. He summoned his wand from across the room and just laid into her." Fred said.

"She had it coming." Malfoy said.

"*He didn't kill her.*" Ginny said in a stage whisper, earning herself a glare from the Slytherin.

"You said you did, though." Harry said.

"Technicality." Said the twins.

"After he knocked her unconscious, he floated her out to the Forbidden Forest and left her there. They found her a couple days later. Something had been munching on her." Ginny said.

"That's pleasant." Harry said, making a face.

"So with Umbridge gone, Fudge's little plan to keep control over Hogwarts had failed. So he ran off. In addition, Voldemort is uh... well, he's kind of done some things..." Hermione said, making a vague gesture.

"What do you mean?" Asked Harry.

"Azkaban is gone." Said Malfoy.

"...Gone?" Harry repeated.

"Gone." Malfoy said. "No idea where it is. It just isn't where it was anymore. There's a Dark Mark in the air over where it was. No one can get it to go away."

"With Fudge missing, the Prophet has no orders coming down to hide Voldemort's return. The minute Umbridge was found dead, which was a day after Fudge vanished, for the record, the school returned to being under Dumbledore's power. First thing he did was give an exclusive interview to the Prophet. The knowledge that Voldemort is back is out there now and, as it was Dumbledore who said it, people believe." Ginny said.

"Took long enough." Harry said.

"It was awesome." Ginny said, grinning now. "Dumbledore outed Umbridge as a Death Eater. Which means that everyone also knows that Fudge hired a Death Eater to take control away from Dumbledore, who everyone had seen as being the leader of the 'good' side during the *last* war with Voldemort."

"Fudge escaped before the inevitable happened. So he's missing and presumed dead, huh?" Harry said.

"Yup." Fred said. "Not been heard from since. No one has a clue where he is, if he *is* still alive."

"Oh yeah - we've dropped out, by the way." George added.

"Quit the night Umbridge tried forcing info out of us." Fred said, nodding. "Stupid toad had our brooms locked up. Can you believe that?"

"So we had to go get 'em back." George said. "And then, in honor of Umbridge being gone, we turned Hogwarts on its nose."

"Flitwick's got a section of the second floor corridor roped off. He said our portable swamp was a stroke of brilliance." Fred said, grinning.

"Why drop out then?" Asked Harry. "And wasn't it a bit of an odd time to do that considering I'd up and vanished?"

"Well, we didn't figure you were at the bloody Ministry with dad fighting Voldemort." Fred said.

"Woulda been a pretty good guess if either of us had thought that up, though." George added.

"I'm sorry." Harry said.

"Sorry? For what?" Asked Fred.

"Getting everyone into a trap." Harry said.

"You hadn't slept well in weeks, Harry." George said, walking over and patting Harry on the shoulder.

Fred followed his twin and did likewise for the other shoulder. "You went after the only family you had worth a damn."

"It's no excuse." Harry said.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, Potter." Malfoy said. "Those that died have been remembered as heroes. Dumbledore also talked about what happened down there with the Prophet. Leaving out the gorier details, I assure you."

"Good to know." Harry said, looking off.

"Did you really kill Bellatrix?" Asked Malfoy.

"I did." Harry replied.

"Good. I barely knew her and I wanted her dead. You did the world a service." Malfoy stated.

"The fewer Death Eaters in the world, the better." Harry said, smiling crookedly. Then, looking over at Luna, he asked, "Where are *they*?"

"I'm not sure." Luna responded. "Solieyu is probably in the Nest. I think Nymphadora is in the Tower... They've been worried, you know."

"Fine time for that to occur. Has Leon decided his powers are acting up?" Asked Harry.

"Not at all." Luna said, looking sour for the first time since Harry had known her. "But they've been worried."

"Good." Harry said, biting out the word with enough bitterness to make everyone cast him an odd look. "...What? I've moved on. I'm just mad that Luna has to suffer because of this damn mess."

"I'll be fine, Harry. Thank you, though." Luna said, offering Harry a genuine smile. "I'm perfectly capable of waiting until he has his head on straight."

"Still. If you feel like coming by and griping about how stupid people can be, I'm always up for a session of it." Harry said, causing Luna to chuckle quietly.

"So what do you plan to do now?" Asked Hermione.

"Well," Harry said, looking up at the ceiling. "I plan to go and eat - don't worry, I know I need to pace myself for a few days until my stomach's used to real food again - and then I plan to go the hell back to bed. Two months I've been asleep and I'm *still* tired."

"A bit late for dinner tonight. So what say we all stop in for breakfast tomorrow?" Fred suggested.

"Sounds like a plan. If I'm not up, someone come in and douse me with ice water." Harry said. "Alright, you lot. I'm up and coherent. Go to bed. All of you. Most of you look like you haven't gotten a lot of sleep lately. Trust me - not good for you. Makes you cranky and stupid."

"I'm surprised you're in such relatively high spirits." Ginny said. "All things considered."

"I can't change it." Harry said, shrugging. "I can't change what's happened. Sirius wouldn't want me to sit around moping for months on end. He'd want me to push myself forward, get stronger, and beat the living hell out of every last Death Eater before taking Voldemort himself down."

"Speaking of." Hermione said. "Dumbledore talked about him, too."

"Oh? What did he say?" Asked Harry.

"The truth." Hermione said, smiling sadly. "That he was falsely convicted, that Pettigrew is still alive and was the real culprit, and that Sirius died a hero."

"Sounds about right." Harry murmured, eyes downcast. "...How's Moony doing? Anyone know?"

"We asked Dumbledore, but he wouldn't say a whole lot. He's probably doing loads better by now, though." Ginny said.

"I'll have to check on him tomorrow." Harry said. "Scatter, kids. I want food and sleep."

"Aye aye, King Raven." Replied the twins. "Off to our home we go!"

"Shame, really." Harry said. "Who will prank people now?"

"A tragic loss. But you know..." Fred began.

"A new generation of tricksters will emerge sooner or later." George continued.

"And when they do..."

"We'll be ready."

"We're opening our joke shop this summer!" They finished in unison.

"Brilliant! I'll have to stop in, then." Harry said, offering the twins a smile. "Got a name picked out?"

"We were thinking of 'Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes' - what do you think?" Asked George.

"Always a fan of alliteration." Harry answered, grinning.

"Well then, we're off. We'll spread the word that you're up and about, Harry." Fred said.

"Enjoy the food, enjoy the sleep, enjoy the insanity you'll walk out to tomorrow!" George added.

"Yes, yes, my life is a three-ring circus. Get out of here, dammit!" Harry said, glaring at the twins as they left the room.

"It's been a lot quieter in Gryffindor Tower without them around." Ginny said, smiling wistfully as they left. "Ron's been lonely."

"He should be glad he isn't their target anymore." Hermione said, getting to her feet. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I really should be off, too."

"No need for excusing yourselves. I know you've all been worried. Nice to know people still do..." Harry said.

"We could never hate you." Luna said, standing as well.

"She's right." Said Ginny. "No matter what you do, we'll be able to forgive you."

"Are the lot of you going to drag Potter into the bedroom and just keep him up all night or something?" Malfoy asked, scowling. "Enough with the sap. I'm going to vomit if this goes on much longer."

Ginny smacked him in the back of the head.

"Dammit, woman!" Malfoy growled, standing up and glaring at Ginny. "What was that for?"

"Being a jackass." Ginny stated, raising an eyebrow.

"You can't hit him!" Pansy protested. "Only I may hit Draco."

"I'll duel you for the right." Ginny said.

"We'll see." Pansy said.

With a prompt, overacted '*hmph!*' Ginny turned and walked out of the Pit, popping her head back in to wish everyone a good night. Hermione and Luna followed shortly after.

When Malfoy got up, Harry asked, "How're things in Slytherin?"

"They got better when Dumbledore returned. I think he's managed to pull all of the Death Eater children aside at some point or another by now. Dunno what he's said to them. I have a few ideas, though." Malfoy said.

"Probably warning them what will happen if they keep down the path they're on." Harry said.

"Probably. Well, I need to get back. Can't have Blaise holding down the fort on his own. He's about ready to strangle me as is." Malfoy stated, heading for the door. "Good to have you back, Potter."

Harry snorted as Malfoy left. "Dear Merlin. If someone had told me *he* would say *that* to me at **any** point in my life, I would've said they were crazy."

"It took him awhile to get his head around it, but once he did..." Pansy trailed off.

"Big change, yeah." Harry agreed.

"Well..." Pansy began. "I should probably head back now, too."

"No."

"No?"

"No."

Pansy blinked. "Gonna need a little more than 'no,' Harry. 'No' what?"

"No, you shouldn't head back to Slytherin." Harry said. "I want you here. With me."

"You mean... sleeping?" Pansy asked.

"Yeah. If I had gotten over my own issues earlier and accepted your offer, Sirius might have never been killed." Harry said, shutting his eyes. "I need to sleep, Pansy. I need you here to help me."

Pansy grinned, wrapping her arms around Harry and kissing him quickly. "I thought you'd never ask. Still want to get that food?"

"I think," Harry began slowly, tilting his head up. "That sleep... should be higher on the list from now on. And if everyone's stopping by for breakfast in the morning, I might as well wait. Two months without solids, another twelve hours won't hurt."

"It begs a question, though." Pansy said.

"Oh? What?" Asked Harry.

"What, precisely, am I going to sleep *in*?"

"Oh. Um. ...Huh. Okay, hadn't thought of that." Harry said, brow creased. "I suppose, if you wouldn't mind the draft, you could always enlarge one of my shirts and sleep in that."

"Enlarge it? What, you don't want to see my legs?" Pansy asked, prodding Harry's shoulder.

"No! I mean yes! I mean... wait. Dammit, Pansy, I just woke up. Don't make me think!" Harry whined.

"Awww. I'm sorry." Pansy said, laughing. "Okay, I'll blow up a shirt and use it. I can bring some of my stuff down tomorrow."

"That'll work." Harry said, pushing himself off of the bedroom door so he could open it. "Shall we?"

"Let's!" Said Pansy, stepping into the bedroom.

Closing the door behind them, Harry headed back over to the bed and flopped down on it. He stretched out and sighed. "How can I still be tired? How badly was my body deprived?"

"More than you thought. Which drawer are your shirts in?" Pansy asked.

"Second one down on the left." Harry stated, staring up.

"Finally decided to get a good night's sleep, I see." Commented Boris.

"Quiet, you." Harry hissed lazily. *"Could you hear us talking?"*

"More or less." Boris said. *"How're you feeling now?"*

"...Alright, strangely enough. I feel alright." Harry said, closing his eyes.

"That's never going to *not* sound weird." Pansy said. "Don't look, I'm going to change in here."

"I won't look." Harry said.

"Aww, really? Not even a peek?" Pansy asked.

"Parkinson..." Harry said.

"Okay, okay. I'll stop teasing you." Pansy said. A minute later and she was crawling into bed next to Harry. "So how do you usually sleep? On your back? Stomach? Side?"

"On my back, usually." Harry said, looking over at Pansy. "...Wow."

Pansy grinned. "My legs are epic."

Harry snorted.

"What?! They are!" Pansy said.

"Just come here." Harry said, opening his arms.

Pansy smiled and stretched out on her left side, scooting over so she could rest her head against Harry's shoulder. "...I've been waiting a long time for this."

"I'm sorry for making you wait." Harry murmured, wrapping his arms around her.

"It's alright." Pansy said. "I'm just glad you're letting me. For whatever reasons."

"Not too many people would be able to do what you're doing, you know. Offering to be here for me, knowing full well what might happen." Harry said, leaning his head lightly against hers.

"I just want you to be happy, Harry." Pansy said, sighing softly. "Optimally, yes, it would be me who makes you happiest. But... yeah..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you think about it." Harry said. "I should just shut up and try going back to sleep."

"It's alright." Pansy murmured, curling up against him. "I just want to enjoy this as long as I can, just in case it doesn't last."

"It would take a lot to make me let them back into my life at this point." Harry whispered, lightly stroking Pansy's hair. "So let's not think about it and just live for the moment now that things around this place have calmed down."

"Sounds like a plan." Pansy said.

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Harry woke up some time before dawn the following morning. It felt good to be drowsy. Drowsy was good. Drowsy was normal. Drowsy meant getting to sleep more if one wanted. Having the option was wonderful to have back. His eyes glanced at the girl still asleep in his arms. He wasn't sure how he came to deserve having a girl like Pansy being in love with him, but he was glad she was. She knew and she still wanted to be closer.

It was going to be hard on them both if Solieyu and Tonks snapped out of it.

Tonks would just have to deal with it, Harry decided. After all, she wasn't there for him when he needed her most. Pansy was. And yet... Harry couldn't bring himself to hate either of them. He still loved them both. But he just couldn't get through to them. It led him down another path he didn't want to think about. What would happen that summer?

Obviously, he would be going back to Privet Drive. Then what?

He had no godfather anyone. His only legal guardians were the blasted Dursleys. So he was stuck there all summer? It would be awkward if he went to Tonks' house. Unless she made the first move, it would seem like he was desperate. It wasn't far from the truth, but it didn't make it any easier to think about. Would they even be able to salvage their relationship when and if she and Solieyu snapped out of it?

Harry forced his Occlumency barriers up and closed down that part of his brain. He didn't want to think about the future. He wrapped his arms tighter around Pansy, who mumbled something incoherently and pressed against him further. He just smiled at her, kissing the top of her head.

"Life is never easy." Came a soft hiss from nearby.

"Mine seems harder than most." Harry replied, his voice equally soft.

"Do you love Pansy?" Asked the snake.

"Not like I love Tonks. I love Pansy like I love Leon. Or the twins. Or Luna. They're my friends. I love all of them. I wish I could love Pansy like I love Nymmy. But I don't think I can. And I hate that, because she's done so much for me in such a short time. Even after what I did at the Ministry..."

"True friends stand by one another, no matter the circumstances."

Harry smiled at that. *"Guess so. Wonder what today's going to be like. ...Man, I don't even know what date it is. O.W.L.s should be soon,*

if they haven't already started. Gonna need to read myself into a coma to catch up."

"No skipping sleep for it." Boris stated, his voice drier than normal.

"Yeah, definitely no skipping sleep for it." Harry agreed.

"Too noisy. Sh'up..." Pansy mumbled, tilting her head and cracking her eyes slightly. "Wha's goin' on?"

"Nothing." Harry murmured. "Didn't mean to wake you."

S'okay..." Pansy said, rubbing at her eyes. "W'time izzit?"

"Too early." Harry said. "Guess I didn't need quite as much sleep as I thought. You wanna go back to sleep or get up?"

"Might as well get up." Pansy said. "Slept really deeply. Very unusual for me..."

"Too much worrying." Harry said, grinning.

"And whose fault is that?" Pansy asked, grinning back.

"It's like I always used to say - I'm the hero. I'm always fine!" Harry declared, patting himself on the chest.

Pansy snorted as she sat up and stretched. "Mmmmmph. Yes, well, Mr. Hero, you've got a long day ahead of you and an hour or two before anyone shows up for breakfast. What do you wanna do?"

"I... really want a bath." Harry said, sitting up as well. "I guess Madam Pomfrey dropped in regularly to check up on me. Magical cleansing isn't the same as real bathing, though. I feel like I have a year's worth of funk clinging to me."

"Can I join you?" Asked Pansy.

"Parkinson." Harry said, trying not to smile as he gave Pansy the evil eye. "Don't make me roll you out of this bed."

"Roll me out of this bed? And how, exactly, would you do that?"
Asked Pansy.

"I'd wrap you in the blanket and give a push, of course." Harry said.

"Try it and you get ice down your pants next time we're sleeping."
Pansy said, raising an eyebrow.

"Ooh. Ice bad. Ice very bad. Ice down the pants *amazingly* bad. Okay, no rolling you out of bed. As for me..." Harry said, pushing the covers back and slipping out. He stretched, his back popping in a few places.
"Gah..."

"Gonna take awhile to work out the kinks?" Asked Pansy, slipping out of bed as well.

"Probably." Harry said, nodding. "I'm gonna go hop in the tub. If I see you peeking, I'll make you sleep on the couch."

"Liar." Pansy said, walking over and kissing Harry on the cheek. "I'm too lovable to punish."

"I need some coffee." Harry said, shaking his head as he gathered some fresh clothes from his dresser. "You're too energetic when you wake up."

"Yes, well, I try." Pansy said. "Enjoy your bath. Just don't fall asleep in there, yeah?"

"If I've survived this long only to drown in the tub, I'd be a pretty lousy hero." Harry said, opening the bedroom door.

Pansy watched him from the doorway, stretching again as she turned and headed back towards the bed. Throwing herself back on it, she looked over to the night stand where Boris was watching her. "So? Did I pass the test? Am I good for him?"

Boris stared at the girl for awhile before nodding his head.

"Good to know. Would hate for you to bite me in my sleep or something. Wonder what he talks about with you..." Pansy said,

rolling onto her back and sprawling out in the empty bed. "Ah well. Think I'll get a bit more sleep while our glorious hero scrubs away. Oh, hey. do me a favor?"

Boris blinked at the girl.

"If he comes back in here to change for any reason, wake me up somehow." Pansy murmured, grinning.

Boris rolled his eyes.

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"Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. Let's go."

Harry stepped out of the Pit, Pansy following behind him and closing its door. Reaching the top of the stairs and performing the usual detection charms, they stepped out into the hall. Breakfast had been wonderful, though Harry wished he could have eaten more. His body was telling him to eat, but his brain knew better. He had taken it as easily as he could, though he was feeling slightly ill now. Whether that was from the food in his system or how the school would react to him being up and about, he wasn't sure.

His Occlumency barriers were fully in place by the time he and Pansy reached the Great Hall. People had pressed up against the walls as he had passed by. Evidently, they had heard the story or still thought he was psychotic. Either or.

The Great Hall was still filling up when they arrived. He was only coming to let the school know that he was, in fact, back. He really didn't need any more food in him, though he was still parched. Two large goblets of pumpkin juice during breakfast and his throat still felt dry.

The noise died down as he and Pansy entered. Cocking an eyebrow, he scanned the four House tables before raising his eyebrows and shrugging at Dumbledore, who had long since returned to his position

at the staff table. The headmaster hid a smile, though his eyes were twinkling.

"Yes, yes, I'm a sight to behold. Don't let my dazzling presence stop you all from eating, though!" Harry declared. When all he got was a smattering of nervous laughter, he rolled his eyes and headed for the Ravenclaw table. As Pansy passed by him, he asked, "Was there something in my teeth?"

She rolled her eyes as she headed to the Slytherin table.

Quickly enough, normalcy returned to the Great Hall. Harry nursed a fresh goblet of pumpkin juice, happy to listen in on the conversations taking place around him. He closed his eyes and smiled. It was good to feel like himself again. At least, that's what he wanted to tell himself. In reality, he had been locking his emotions down since waking up the previous night. All the pain, all the depression, it was all being forced down and chained up. It was because of irrational thought that he had gone and gotten all those people killed.

Never again.

His eyes opened and he got to his feet, taking his goblet with him as he headed up the table. Tapping one of his former dormmates on the shoulder, he asked the boy to move. Geoff made a face, but got up anyway. Harry thanked him, taking his spot and looking across the table, where Solieyu and Tonks were.

"Mornin'." He said, lazily swirling the pumpkin juice in his goblet.

"Good morning." Solieyu said, also nursing a goblet. It looked to Harry as though he had just gotten over another long period of no potion-taking.

"Morning." Tonks murmured, concentrating on her breakfast.

"Things haven't changed." Harry said. "I still want you two back in my life. And I still want you two to admit something's wrong. I can understand if you're mad at me. At least for now, considering what I did. I'm sorry, Nym. He wouldn't be dead if I had acted like myself."

"It's fine." Tonks whispered, closing her eyes.

"No. It isn't. And you don't have to act like it is." Harry said.

"You are." Tonks pointed out, looking at him.

"Occlumency!" Harry said, smiling pleasantly. "I've got those feelings locked away. I don't need to be mourning. I don't have time to be mourning. Above all else, what happened taught me one thing. I need to stop sitting around and doing nothing. Voldemort has to be stopped."

"And what do you plan to do?" Solieyu asked. "Fight him from the confines of the Pit?"

"I have my plans. Unfortunately, with Voldemort commandeering Azkaban, I've run into a bit of a roadblock. Gonna have to wait until it shows up again. Then it's a 'simple' rescue mission." Harry said.

"Rescue? Rescue who?" Tonks asked.

"Balthazar." Harry said.

"Who's Balthazar?" Solieyu asked.

"The jewelcrafter who transferred his own soul into the Gauntlet's conduit gem." Harry said. "The gem is in the prison, which just *had* to up and vanish on me."

"You're thinking of putting it back together?" Tonks asked. "But, didn't it kill the guy who originally tried?"

"Yup."

"You can't." Tonks stated.

"Oh? Why?" Asked Harry.

"You'll die too." Solieyu said. "Too much power."

"The fight at the Ministry showed me just what kind of power I really have. It's a matter of focusing it." Harry said. "I can survive the forging process. And I'll use it to kill Voldemort."

"Pretty strong words, considering what happened." Solieyu said.

"Indeed. Which is why I need the Gauntlet. Balthazar could help control the flow of power. No more going out of control. No more instances of my wild magic going haywire. All I'd need to do then is figure out a spell to actually *kill* Voldemort." Harry said. "Haven't worked that part out yet..."

"Why are you telling us this?" Solieyu asked. "Do the others know?"

"No. I figured you two deserved to know first." Harry said.

"Why?" Asked Tonks.

"Because as pigheaded as you two are both being, you're still my friends. And I'll be damned if I'm going to give up on either of you. I'll wait. But I'll keep myself busy. I can't keep thinking about it. It's too distracting. Either you'll overcome this on your own or I'll find a way to put a damper on Leon's powers. Whatever works." Harry said, getting up again. "Well, kids, I have things to do. Lot of schoolwork to catch up on, for one thing."

Setting his goblet down, he gave Pansy a wave as he headed for the doors. Leaving the Great Hall, he let himself smile again. That had gone better than expected. Neither had tried to attack him, anyway, and they had had a mostly civilized conversation. Solieyu had looked like he wanted to punch Harry, but that was to be expected.

'Vampire plus hormones equals bad!' He had thought, heading up the main stairway. It was a beautiful day out. He needed some fresh air. He had been stuck inside for a long time, after all.

Making his way up to the Nest, which he hadn't visited in what seemed like forever, he gazed out over Hogwarts' grounds. There were students loitering out by the lake, watching the giant squid. Hagrid was in the garden behind his house, tending to oversized vegetables. Parts of the Forbidden Forest seemed to shift about

every now and then. And, overhead, a swarm of owls was descending for the school to bring the morning post.

"It's good to be back." Harry said, leaning against the railing and gazing up. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and there was a pleasantly cool wind blowing in. Voldemort wanted to take to the air, huh?

Harry would get the conduit gem back. He had to. It was the only thing that he could think of that would allow Voldemort to lift the island out of the sea. And if the prison was missing, the thought occurred to him that the search parties just weren't looking in the right place. They needed to stop searching the water and start searching the skies. Harry had no doubt in his mind that if the island wasn't airborne already, it would be before long.

For the sake of everyone in the country, he had to think of a plan. Brooms would obviously be needed to reach a floating island. But what about the possibility of altered Dementors roaming about? And where, exactly, was Balthazar and his gem located? Harry didn't know the prison's layout. He would have to look into finding a map. Or maybe...

He blew out a sigh, pushing himself up. Maybe he didn't need to try doing it all on his own this time. He would tell Dumbledore what he knew. That way, the Order would be able to begin a better search. And the earlier they found Azkaban, the better. Optimally, they would put a halt to Voldemort's plans before the Dark Lord got a *chance* to raise the island. But Harry had a feeling that wouldn't happen. He wasn't quite that lucky.

"Well, that's that, I guess." He said, turning and headed back towards the trapdoor. "I'll go down and start catching up on my work, then see if I can't catch Dumbledore in his office after lunch. Gonna be busy, that's for sure. But at least I'll be able to concentrate on the remainder of the school year once I know that the Order's got information about Voldemort's plans."

Before he left, he glanced around the small, open room that he and his friends had once used as their base of operations. It seemed like such a long time ago. Had the three of them (plus Luna) really been able to squeeze into the relatively small space?

"Things change." Harry murmured, drawing his wand and transfiguring the furniture in the room. The couch and chair had been so rickety-looking. He was better at the art now, so he figured it was only right to fix them up a bit. "There. That's better."

He smiled as he left the room. Things *did* change, but they could always be fixed.

Chapter 19 – Summer Plans

A lone figure strode through darkened hallways, the only light coming from torches on the walls that were kept magically lit. The howls and moans of pain from those he passed made him smile. This was such a wonderful place. Such a pleasant, relaxing spot. It was his paradise, and he was glad that he had found out how to take it for his own. It was much better than moving from location to location all the time. That just would not do.

As he pushed open a set of double doors, he continued through a long passage. He was heading to the Soul Chamber. He was so close to his plan coming to fruition. It made him restless. He came down here no fewer than a dozen times each time. Every visit made something akin to joy resound in his dead heart. Soon, very soon, he would practically be invincible.

The hallway opened into a small room with nothing but a pedestal in its middle. He walked up to it and gazed down at the shining, blue gem sitting on it. Ever since he had become aware of the gem and what it truly was, his thoughts had raced. But the idea of lifting his paradise into the air had sadly not been his own. It had come from the miserable, simpering man he kept as a toady. By chance, he had been pondering aloud how best to move a large island about. The little worm had suggested the skies before cowering back into the darkness of his corner.

It had been a stroke of brilliance. He supposed that everyone had to have one in their lifetime. It was perfect timing, as well. It had been months since he had taken command of the prison. In addition to making it airborne, he was planning to completely transform the building itself. It wouldn't do to travel around in a prison, after all. No, he would have a citadel, black as the night and towering over the island it was built upon. And from deep within this citadel, he would send his Death Eaters and Dementors out to cause havoc on the ground below.

The suggestion of flight had brought about a very interesting question: How would the Dementors get by? Obviously, they could not fly. Not as they were, anyway. He had experimented with them,

learned of their rotting biology bit by bit, and had devised a way to alter them to suit his needs. Their numbers were growing, but the development was still slow. Only a few dozen had been altered so far. He would spare a number of them the fate of evolution. He still needed the capacity to collect souls. It had been sacrificed when he had decided to change the Dementors. Naturally, things had to change. And, as there was nothing to fix, he destroyed and began from scratch.

He took the very essence of a Dementor - their decayed magical cores, for they had once been wizards themselves - and built a new body around it. One very similar to that of their first incarnations, but oh so very different at the same time. Thin legs, which were so thin that one would think they could not hold their bearer's weight, allowed them to run. And run they did. Five of his Death Eaters had been pitted against the newborns. None of them had escaped alive.

The arms had been an area of irritation. Clearly, they needed to be stronger to hold down their prey. But, at the same time, they needed to remain long and slender so that they could remain as thin as possible. Three of the five Death Eaters met their untimely fates due to not noticing the Altered hiding in spaces that they logically couldn't have fit. He had left the arms mostly the same in the end. The ability to fit into places no one would expect was a great advantage.

Their bodies were the most useless part, as they had been in their original incarnations. But there was little to be done about that. Little more than a skeleton with flesh, it ensured that the Altered would remain slim. The biggest change that he had made were to the Dementors' heads. A glorified device to extract one's soul. It had taken the most time to research how to change the mouths to something more deadly. It took time for a Dementor to remove a man's soul. Time that could allow the victim to be saved. Time that could allow the victim to cast a Patronus, if enough semblance of happiness remained to perform such a maneuver.

Fangs had been the obvious solution, though what to create them out of... that was the real issue. Obviously it couldn't be merely bone. The mouths were not large enough nor strong enough to exert enough force to shatter bone in one bite. He had but to look around him to

find the solution. The prison walls, thick and bearing wards so that they were immune to magic, had been taken and re-molded into large, curved fangs. It had gotten the result he had hoped it would. Anything within range of the Altered were unable to cast spells. The prison-made fangs emitted a sort of force field around the Dementor's body that extended out almost three feet.

He had jammed the metallic teeth into each Altered by hand, fusing the creations into their heads from the distance required to do such a thing. Of course, walking killing machines would do little without proper sight. Dementors hunted on emotions almost exclusively. They had no sight as they had no eyes. This just would not do. Luckily, not all of his followers were blithering idiots. A small number had medical knowledge. Medical knowledge, he had felt, was a useless trait. He did not care if his Death Eaters lived or died so long as they carried out their mission.

But it had turned out to be *quite* useful. He knew, of course, of magical eyes and the powers they could hold. It was simply a matter of getting ahold of the special materials needed to create them. And, as Irma Voxley worked for St. Mungo's, it had been laughably easy to do so. Transforming them into something that could serve his purposes, however, had taken more effort. In the end, he was left with multiple round, glowing red eyes that he put into each of his Altered's empty sockets.

The effect was quite dramatic. Unblinking, glowing red eyes. Gleaming fangs that emitted an anti-magic aura. Legs capable of sprinting. Hands capable of slashing. The only thing that had completely eluded him was flight. But even that was starting to draw closer. Only a few more months, if all went right. Then his Altered would fly down and leave a wave of terror in their wake. And once the prison itself was altered and warded, he would be invincible. He had personally looked over the plans set to take place in a mere week's time. The prison would be completely transformed. It would require his Death Eaters to sacrifice most of their power, but that did not matter. So long as his own was not required. His power was reserved for lifting the island.

The Orb of Daedalus. It had been the first thing he had sent his Death Eaters to retrieve after his less than glorious resurrection. Capable of giving anything flight if enough power was poured into it, he had planned to utilize the artifact long ago to raise the prison island from its waters. That plan had ended when his body had been destroyed all those years ago. But now that he had returned, his plan was set in motion once more.

The Orb was kept in his personal chambers, guarded by almost three dozen different wards and traps. In addition, he had split a small part of his soul off to infuse with the Orb. The only way it could be destroyed was if someone killed him. And he had no plans to die any time soon. Not now that everything was going according to plan.

He smiled darkly, turning from the blue gemstone and walking back out the way he had entered. There were still things in life that surprised even him. What he had witnessed over two months ago had been one of these things. Harry Potter, his power fully focused, devastating and disintegrating one of his strongest, in a fit of hatred and rage. It had been a glorious event to behold. It had put him in such a good mood that he had even disregarded the fact that the prophecy hadn't been found.

The boy couldn't contain that much power for long. Not without help. And when that day arrived, he would be waiting. He would extend an invitation to the boy. He would help ease the pain of Potter's overflowing magical energy in exchange for a life of servitude. And, perhaps, the thought of seeing his friends eaten alive if he didn't made the idea that much more delicious to him. The boy *would* bow before him. It was only a matter of time.

Entering the room he had long since changed into his meeting room, he walked over to the tall, thin throne and sat, eyes settling upon the door he had entered from. Yes, it was only matter of time. And if the boy slipped up, even once more, he would be there. And he would strike a deal. If Potter refused, everything he had ever known and everyone he had ever loved would be destroyed in front of him. For how could he and his rogue band of supposed heroes ever beat him? Breaching the future citadel alone would be nigh impossible without

intimate knowledge of the place. No... once his plans were set into motion, things would change.

His thoughts were interrupted when the door opened and a black-clad figure stepped in, immediately dropping to one knee and lowering his head.

"Speak." He commanded.

"My Lord, we have found the first part. It was located deep within the suicide forest, as you had said. It is being brought back as we speak." Said the masked man.

"Very good." Purred Lord Voldemort, his snakelike eyes lighting up. One of two magical items he had needed to give his Altered flight had been kept in Japan. In one of the icy caves at the base of Mt. Fuji, in Aokigahara, the so-called suicide forest, was the item that he had sought. The forest was a dangerous place, haunted by the vengeful spirits of those who had gone to the forest to kill themselves. Evidently, the Death Eaters he had tapped to go on this mission were quite skilled if they could repel the darkness lurking within.

"Is there anything you wish for my team to do once the Box is safely within these walls?" Asked the man.

Voldemort was silent for a moment before a grin split his face. "Yes." He said, drawing the word out. "You and your men will leave immediately for the second part. The Box is useless without the Key."

"Direct us and we will retrieve it, My Lord!" Declared the man.

"The Key is kept within a labyrinth under the Popigai crater in Siberia." Voldemort stated. "Legend tells of demons guarding it, to say nothing of the other creatures that stalk through the maze-like corridors. If your team succeeds in retrieving the Key, you will be ensured a higher place by my side."

"Thank you, My Lord." Said the man. "I will inform my men at once."

Voldemort nodded his head slightly and the man stood, turning and leaving the room. The Dark Lord smiled at the door as it closed. One

of Philip Lemarchand's lost puzzle boxes, the Box of Black Hearts was locked to all methods save for one. The Key of Neverending Night, kept separate from the Box for hundreds of years, was this method.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the stale, recycled air. It was a very good time to be alive.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Time had passed. Life had returned to normal. Or, at least, what passed for normal for Harry Potter. Tonks and Solieyu remained stubborn in their ways, even when a crowd of nearly twenty girls was following the surly vampire around one day. Harry had pointed out, but Solieyu just snorted and kept on walking. Harry had rolled his eyes and continued on his way.

Aside from that, all was good. O.W.L.s had gone off without a hitch, and Harry was simply riding the rest of his time at Hogwarts out. Only two more years in this place, he had thought. Two more years and he would be independent. It was a pleasant enough thought. He wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to *be* yet, though. The obvious choice was an Auror. He had read up on Bluewood. He knew what the training process meant. Mostly proving yourself capable of defending and dispatching your enemy. Old hat for Harry. He was sure he could beat the test right then and there, but refrained from commenting on it.

The biggest surprise to Harry was that Malfoy was loosening up considerably. It was to the point where they would linger around the Pit in the evenings, joking around like old friends. Or, more precisely, old rivals. Which was exactly what they were. Harry still hadn't accepted the blonde's challenge for a rematch. He had driven the conversation away from the topic when it came up, much to Malfoy's annoyance. In truth, he worried that old feelings much be dredged up by such an event. The last thing he needed was Malfoy running off now.

He had talked over his plans of guarding the Pit to the Slytherin one evening, when no one else was around. The two had been extremely bored, as nothing had happened that day. It was something Harry was always happy to see, but it did leave a lot to be desired in

regards to talking about the day. So Harry had brought up the subject of wanting to summon something to protect the Pit.

"What does it need protection from?" Malfoy had asked. "We're the only ones who know it exists."

"Better safe than sorry." Harry had said. "I know what to do, I just need to gather the items I need. Then I can perform the summoning ritual. Dumbledore said he wants to be here when it happens. Just in case."

Malfoy had given Harry a strange look before asking, "So what do you want to summon?"

Harry had just grinned at that, telling Malfoy he would have to wait and see. He said he would offer to let the blonde sit in on the summoning process, but it was really up to Dumbledore. Malfoy had scowled and said he would just wait until afterwards.

Harry and Pansy continued to sleep together. He still wasn't used to how peppy the dark-haired girl was in the mornings. It was a sharp contrast to how Tonks had always been, so tired and wanting to eat as soon as she realized she couldn't drift back off. As time had passed, Harry had grown closer to Pansy, telling him of his life before learning he was a wizard. She, in turn, told him about what life as the child of two Death Eaters had been like. As it turned out, neither of them had had brilliant home lives.

A few interesting things happened at the end of that school year. For one thing, Ginny and Dean Thomas officially became an item, much to Malfoy's irritation. Ginny always hopped on the couch next to him on the nights the Pit was crowded, and she always started talking about Dean. Malfoy had learned to ignore the redhead's constant ramblings. Hermione and Luna were usually reading in the corners of the room when Ginny's boyfriend speeches occurred, and Harry could have sworn that he saw them hiding grins one time.

On the night before the final day of school rolled around, everyone had gathered in the Pit for dinner. It had been a mostly quiet affair, with everyone's minds occupied with how the summer would be. After the eating was over and people had gotten comfortable in the main

room, the talking really started. Mostly because Harry had become curious.

"Pansy. Draco. What are you two going to do?" Harry asked.

"Well," Malfoy began, "Dumbledore's going to take me to wherever mother currently is. So I assume I'll be safe."

"That's good. And if she's where I think she is, we may see each other before the summer ends." Harry said, smirking.

"As for me, I'll probably tag along with Draco. I really have nowhere else to go. I'm sure Dumbledore would understand. I hope he does." Pansy said.

"If he makes you go back to your parents, I'll personally come and break you out." Harry said, scowling. "Maybe I could talk to him."

"I think he knows how you feel." Hermione said, not looking up from her book. "Both of them should be taken to Order headquarters."

"Yeah." Harry said, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Hope everyone plays nice."

Harry had sat both Pansy and Malfoy down awhile back, explaining Grimmauld Place to them. Both seemed somewhat surprised that a place like that could be used for something so important. But now, Harry wondered aloud if the house was safe.

"Sirius is dead. So now what?" He asked.

"It'll probably go to Tonks' mother or Draco's." Hermione said, glancing up. "They are close relatives, right?"

"Yeah. Didn't think about that. Well, that's good, then." Harry said, brow creasing. "Wonder what Kreacher's gonna do..."

"Hang Kreacher." Ginny muttered. "He gives me the creeps."

"Hanging him would make him too happy." Harry said.

"...True." Ginny said, making a face. "Oh well. I can dream."

Everyone had eventually slipped away to go to bed, leaving Harry and Pansy alone on the couch. Harry wished he could get away like Pansy and Malfoy were going to. He wished that he didn't have to return to Privet Drive. Vernon was still probably in a mad cow fury over what had happened to his idiot whale of a son. Harry didn't care. It was Dudley's own fault that he had gotten his soul taken. Harry wasn't his keeper, after all.

Finally, he groaned, running a hand through his hair. "Damn it all, I don't want to go back to Privet Drive. Bloody hate the Dursleys. Voldemort could kill them and string their bodies along the street lights and I wouldn't care!"

"Strong words." Pansy said, raising an eyebrow.

"It's no more than they deserve." Harry stated, staring into the fire. "I'd do it myself if I thought I could get away with it. Revenge for all those years of what basically amounts to torture."

Pansy leaned against Harry, causing him to wrap an arm around her. "Try not to think about it too much. Let's just enjoy this. It'll be the last night we get to spend together for a few months."

"Yeah..." Harry murmured, letting out a sigh. "I wish I could be there at headquarters for you. Can't imagine it'll be easy seeing everyone else with their parents."

"I've long since decided how I feel about my parents." Pansy said. "I'll be fine. Draco will be there, after all."

"True. Be careful around the twins, though. Never lay down in bed without inspecting it first. Oh, hey, you'll like my room there. Password protected door with the password in Parseltongue. ...Bet it's going to be really in need of a clean by the time I get back." Harry said.

"Why do you need a password protected door? Just to keep the Weasleys out?" Asked Pansy.

"Mrs. Weasley." Harry corrected. "Bloody cow of a woman who thinks she owned Sirius' house. Let's just say you'll become a target for her once we're both at the place."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Weasley doesn't think someone 'as young as me' should be sleeping with other people. She burst in on me once. It wasn't pretty. Irritating woman..." Harry muttered.

"Yes, well, I'm sure I can handle her. I've gotten into huge rows with my mother before and I usually won. I think I'll do alright." Pansy said.

"If you're sure." Harry chuckled. "Wanna get an early start on sleep?"

"I'd love to." Pansy said. "Wait here and I'll go change real quick."

"Alright."

Pansy hopped up and headed into the bedroom. Harry leaned his head on the back of the couch, closing his eyes. Summer was almost on them again. It had been a rough year. More so than usual. But Harry wasn't happy to see it ending. Panic had been rising in him, despite his Occlumency barriers being stronger than ever, for a week or two now. Being back at Number Four meant sleeping alone. Sleeping alone meant nightmares. It wasn't going to be good. Not in the least.

Harry hoped the next Minister of Magic, who was set to be decided on in mid-July, would allow Harry a bit of leeway in regards to the underage magic rule. He had been fighting Voldemort longer than most. He deserved a *little* special treatment, he felt.

He had told Dumbledore about Voldemort's plans months ago. It had been good to get the weight off of his chest. He still worried and thought about his seemingly immortal enemy - he couldn't help it. He was a Ravenclaw. Thinking was what he did - but he knew it was best right now for the Order to be handling things. And besides, Harry had a bad feeling that if Voldemort wanted *him* to come and play, he would send a message, loud and clear.

"You can come in now!" Pansy called. Harry smiled and got up, heading for the bedroom himself. Pansy had brought down her clothes awhile back. It had made things much simpler for the both of them.

Tonight, she was wearing one of her seemingly endless supply of silk pajamas. Harry had just rolled his eyes the first time he saw a pair of them. He was fine in 'lesser' materials. So long as he slept well, it didn't matter what he was wearing.

"You know the drill." He said, smirking at Pansy, who was sitting on the bed. "Turn."

"Awww." Pansy whined, turning around to face away.

"Boris, if she peeks, tell me." Harry hissed.

"Yes, yes." Boris replied lazily.

Harry changed quickly, poking Pansy before he crawled into bed. When she turned back, she had a wide grin on her face. "...What?"

"You've got a cute butt. That's all." Pansy said.

"Boris!"

"Watch her yourself." Boris murmured. *"I'm sleepy."*

Harry gave a withering glance at the curled-up miniature taipan before flopping back and slipping under the covers. "What am I going to do with the both of you?"

"Well," Pansy said, curling up next to him, "You're going to hold me until we literally can't stay in bed anymore..."

"And you'll forgive me because I'm wiser than you are and you still ask me things." Boris added.

"...Oi." Was all Harry could say. He wrapped his arms around Pansy, who was giggling quietly, and tried to ignore the distinct impression that his snake was grinning at him.

oOoOoOoOoOoOo

Harry had mixed feelings about the Hogwarts Express this year.

He would be sitting with Ginny, Dean Thomas, Luna, and Hermione this year. It was a very odd group and quite different than the one he normally sat with. Not that he minded the company, it was just another reminder that things weren't fixed yet. Despite locking up all of the relevant emotions, it still bugged him. And the closer they got to King's Cross, the more irritated Harry felt like he was going to get. For one thing, he had no idea how the hell he was going to get home.

He spent most of the trip staring out the window. It had been a weird year on the whole. And things weren't going to be getting any easier as time passed. He was also slightly worried about Malfoy and Pansy. Dumbledore had said they would indeed be taken to Grimmauld Place for the summer. He had also said that Andromeda would be taking control of the place, so to speak, so there was a good chance that Harry would need to relearn of its location.

Luna was quiet for most of the trip, too, gazing down at an old copy of the Quibbler and acting as though she was interested in it. Harry knew she was thinking of Solieyu, just as he was thinking of Tonks. Yes, it would be a very awkward summer if Harry needed to escape from Number Four again.

Hermione and Ginny mostly chatted amongst themselves, with poor Dean looking like he had picked the wrong spot to sit. Eventually, he decided to just nap the trip away. A good plan, Harry thought.

When the train arrived back in London, Harry sighed and got up. "Well, kids, it's been an interesting year. But I have no ruddy idea how I'm going to get back to Number Four. So I'd best hop off early."

"You could always take the Knight Bus." Dean said.

"Leon takes it to get home." Harry said. "Tonks' mum drives us to their place and I always just walked from there."

"Rock and a hard place. Ouch. Good luck, mate." Dean said.

"Gonna need it. Gin, Hermione, Luna - see you lot in a few months. Or less, if my luck gets a bit better." Harry said, nodding to the girls before leaving his compartment.

He slid his hands into his pockets as he slowly made his way through the crowded hall. He toyed with the idea of adopting a gruff voice and yelling for everyone to get the hell out of his way, but with his luck, everyone would panic instead of ducking into compartments or pressing up against the wall. So he merely bided his time until he could get to his trunk.

Platform Nine and Three-Quarters was packed. Harry smiled faintly as he looked around. Even in times as dark as these, people were still capable of seeming so happy. Harry once more had to fight off thoughts on how many of these people wouldn't make it through the summer. He brought a hand up to rub the bridge of his nose as he sighed. He could think about that later. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

He couldn't hail the Knight Bus. He and Solieyu would get into a huge fight before it got anywhere. He knew they would. And he couldn't ask Andromeda for a ride home. Considering the rift between her daughter and Harry, it would be outright rude.

Another sigh and he moved his carted trunk through the barrier to the Muggle side of the station. He had figured it would be too busy to notice someone going through, and he was right. The Muggle side was even more packed than the wizarding side was. And Muggles were very good at simply not seeing things.

He hadn't expected to suddenly get grabbed by the shoulders, and even with his barriers up, he jumped. His wands were nearly drawn before he saw who had grabbed him.

"Fred! George! What the *hell*?"

The twins stood on either side of Harry, smirking at him.

"It seems we were right." Fred said.

"Indeed we were!" George continued, nodding.

"Ickle Harry needs himself a ride home."

"But the options are not promising."

"So he stands around, looking forlorn..."

"I was *not* looking forlorn." Harry muttered.

"Until a pair of dashing knights step in to offer their services!"
Finished the twins in unison.

"So what, I'm a damsel in distress now?" Harry asked, making a face.

"Something like that!" George said, slapping Harry on the back.

"We've come to give you a ride." Fred added, holding up some keys.

"You two? Driving? Dear Merlin, I'd rather risk the Knight Bus." Harry groaned. "Whose car did you jack?"

"We didn't jack anyone's car!" Fred said, sounding indignant.

"Not our fault if dad just leaves his keys out where anyone can take them." George said.

"How very true, how very true." Fred murmured.

"So, O King Raven, do you accept the offer?" Asked George.

Harry rolled his eyes. "...If you promise to knock it off with the King Raven stuff, then sure. And thank you."

"After all you've done--"

"Both for our family and in general--"

"It's the least we could do."

"C'mon. Follow us."

And Harry did. He didn't pass Solieyu or the Tonks women, which suited him just fine. The last thing he needed was for Andromeda to

spot him and wrangle him into her car. He had no idea if the woman even knew what had happened. Surely she did. The rift began long before Christmas rolled around.

"Did Ginny and Ron know you were planning to be here?" Asked Harry.

"Nope." George said.

"Spur o' the moment thing." Fred said. "Right this way, good sir!"

"The Anglia's in tip-top shape." George said, pointing out the tiny car with a sweeping gesture.

"And we promise not to make it fly or anything." Fred added.

Harry groaned.

But the twins weren't lying. And, as it turned out, Fred was a capable driver. Harry sat in the back seat and the three made small talk most of the way to Privet Drive. Harry had to point out the proper directions a few times, but as a whole, it wasn't a horrible ride. Fred was less reckless than Andromeda, in any case. Not that he would ever admit that to anyone.

"Any idea when we get to come and rescue you from your relatives this year?" Fred asked, turning onto Harry's street.

"No clue. I may be stuck here for the summer this time." Harry said, shrugging.

"Shame. Having Malfoy around is sure to be fun." Fred said.

"I bet Snape sightings will increase." Harry commented, causing the twins to exchange horrified expressions.

"Well!" George exclaimed, looking back at Harry. "It's a good thing we'll be out of the house the next few months!"

"Stocking up the shelves and all." Fred said.

"Must be nice, being able to disjoint yourselves from everything." Harry said.

Pulling into the driveway of Number Four, Fred turned around and replied, "You'd be surprised. We do a fair amount of heavy thinking."

"Dumbledore's asked if we had any ideas for things that could help the Order." George added.

"Yeah. We're still mulling it over. On one hand, it'd be using our powers for the greater good..."

"But they'd still be involved in the war. And we're having a hard time getting past that part."

"Look at it this way." Harry said. "Helping the Order will help keep people alive. If ever you need to think about what you should do, think about the innocent kids out there that've gotten killed by Voldemort and his men. Think about the parents or grandparents. Think about everyone suffering. Think about that and make your move. It won't do to hesitate."

"He raises a good point." Fred said, looking at his twin.

"Indeed he does."

"Well, we'll think about it on the ride home. Bit far away from here."

"But it was worth it."

"Now then, let's get you inside."

Harry and the twins left the car. And, as Fred and Harry went to the back to get Harry's trunk out, George went up and rang the doorbell. Moments later, Petunia answered. Harry sighed as she let out a surprised wail. She hollered for Vernon, who arrived moments later. And, of course, his uncle immediately began ranting (in as quiet a voice as he could muster) about Harry and the twins and Dudley being 'addled' still.

"We'll calm him down." Fred murmured, glancing at his brother, who looked outright bored listening to Vernon Dursley ranting. "Will you be alright?"

"I haven't been alright in months. But I'll survive. I'm good at that." Harry said.

Fred smiled crookedly and patted Harry on the back as they headed up towards the door.

"*Another long summer?*" Boris hissed quietly from his resting place up Harry's left sleeve.

"*Another long summer.*" Harry confirmed.